SEPP ECKENHAUSSEN

GOODBYE POVERTY JETSET

HOW ART WORKERS MAKE SOLIDARITY ECONOMIES

HUMDRUMPRESS

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HOW IS IT POSSIBLE
THAT SO MUCH MONEY IS MADE
IN THE ARTS
BUT NOT BY THE PEOPLE
WHO MAKE THE ART?

AND
HOW TO CHANGE THAT?

INTRODUCTION: IN DEFENCE OF BAD LIFE DECISIONS

"I've built a good relationship with
my fears. I take them for a walk,
and we pretend to be privileged together;
that we've built a very long working history
together and that, now, it's all paying off."
Maisa Imamović, *1902 Words of Guilt*

"Beauty exists only in autonomy.
No work that fails to express the intelligence
of the possible can be a masterpiece.
Poetry is a bridge cast over the abyss of
nothingness to allow the sharing of different
imaginations and to free singularities."
Bifo, *Precarious Rhapsody*

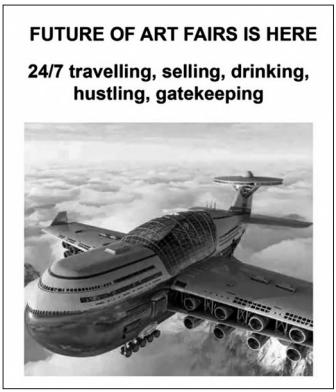
"Not sure if self-employed or unemployed."
Futurama Fry meme

If you are an art worker, you have probably been accused of making poor life decisions by your family, childhood friends, and random people who felt entitled simply because you happened to be at the same party. Unfortunately, it is hard to argue that they were wrong. Becoming an art worker is an awful career decision. Underpayment and unstable working conditions are normalised to the extent that artistic labour is nearly always precarious. So much so, that a 2018 UNESCO report on the working conditions of artists concluded: "The largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour."[1] For other art workers – curators, designers, handlers, guides, teachers, and writers like myself – the situation is not much better. Public funds for galleries and museums are in decline, if there

were any to begin with. Freelance positions replace salaried jobs. A growing cohort of art world freelancers live from gig to gig, highly educated but underpaid, taking whatever glamorous scraps are thrown our way.

Our precarity starkly contrasts with the capital flows of the art market and the huge sums of money dealers, traders, and a few artists manage to secure for themselves. According to a yearly art market report published by Art Basel, sales on the global art market totalled around 65 billion dollars in 2023, which is 4% less than in 2022 but still higher than the last pre-Covid year, 2019. Seemingly with ease, blue- and red-chip galleries, fairs, and auction houses flourish over the backs of underpaid art workers. Art remains big business, just as biennials and art fairs remain hotspots for the global elites. It makes some people rich. But it puts most art workers in a paradoxical position. We stay ever so close to the rich and famous, as a crucial part of the entourage. Whenever real jetsetters fly to Venice, Basel, or Miami by private jet, we follow along in Easyjet planes or Flixbuses. But by the time our work is sold at auction for millions, we're either old or dead. (As they say: "The first 80 years of your career are always the hardest."[2]) We're always close to big

money, but we never *have* it. We're privileged enough to move, make, and experience, but not to own. We are, in short, the poverty jetset.[3]



Meme from @freeze_magazine.

In the poverty jetset, we find ourselves chronically confronted with a simple, haunting question: How is it possible that so much money is made in the arts, but not by the people who make the art? And from this one question, many others follow: What can we do to change our situation? Can we imagine and practice a sustainable art economy beyond precarity? How should we transform the circulation of artworks, the curriculum of art and design academies, the exhibition programs of museums, the organisation of collectives and unions, and, ultimately, the position of art in society? Can art workers make a living without selling their souls? How to say "Goodbye" to the poverty jetset?

HETERODOX ECONOMY MEMES

People working in the arts share many ideas and half-ideas that seem to hold the promise of a better art economy. One may hear the dreamy desires at gallery openings: "If only we had a basic income, everything would be different..." Or the heartfelt calls to action over glasses of natural orange wine: "We're so underpaid, let's

unionise!" These ideas are like memes: they spread virally, without a clear source or origin, and everyone understands them slightly differently. From one day to the next, people throughout Europe speak of `fair practice' as a fix for the cultural labour market. But no one has a very clear definition of fairness, or the broader political programme of which fair practice policies should be part. Does this superficiality mean that the ideas themselves are unserious? Not really. The underlying discontent with the extractivist material conditions of liberal capitalism is real, and so is the belief that a different, heterodox organisation of the economy is possible. So, what happens if we take these ideas seriously, as political demands even? The chapters in this book each centre on one heterodox economy meme popular among art workers. Drawing on personal experience, case studies, theory, and many conversations, the texts try to confront the strategic questions that usually remain underneath the surface of the memetic landscape.

1 Neil, *Culture & Working Conditions for Artists*, 2019, p. 6.

2 @freeze_magazine, see: https://www.instagram.com/freeze_magazine.

3 The beautifully cynical term `poverty jet set' was coined by Grunge-author Douglas Coupland in the 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*: "Poverty jet set: A group of people given to chronic traveling at the expense of long-term job or a permanent residence. Tend to have doomed and extremely expensive phone-call relationships with people named Serge or Ilyana. Tend to discuss frequent-flyer programs at parties." Fifteen years later, art critic Andrew Berardini was the first to explicitly describe art workers as a subset of the poverty jetset in his essay `How to Survive International Art: Notes from the Poverty Jetset,' *Momus,* 1 December 2014. Kuba Szreder has written about the poverty jetset of art workers regularly, and at length. We will encounter him many times throughout this book.

The first chapter, *Art in Permacrisis*, addresses a question that is in equal parts uncomfortable and unavoidable. Why should we care about the organisation of art workers, while the world is on fire? Aren't there many, undeniably larger crises going on than the underpayment of artistic labour? True enough, the world is ridden by never-ending, cascading, compounding crises, and ruled by crisis management. And yet, exactly this state of permacrisis might call for the speculative thinking and storytelling that we can use to reclaim the future. I think we need radical imagination. And I hope the rest of the chapters of this book will contribute to that.

In *Transvaluation Tactics,* Koen Bartijn and I tell stories of art workers making money, literally. It includes a bucket of money in a toilet, a speculative product that financialises art for the common good, a polyamorous relationship with money, and other actions by art workers redefining the rules of the economic game. We were inspired by the work of solidarity organisers, leftist crypto radicals, and the recent popularisation of the idea of post-scarcity. What if the problem of precarity is not a lack of money or resources at all, but the way the economy is organised? Could it be possible for art workers to experiment with values and currencies, and create post-scarcity economies, here and now?

Payment for Art Work explores the viral policy principle of fair practice. This is, without doubt, the biggest improvement of art workers' conditions in the past decade, and it emerged, surprisingly, from the bottom up. Not from governments, institutions, or even unions, but from worker-led collectives and associations. In 2014, the group Working Artists in the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.) from New York launched the first-ever calculator for artist fees. The result: over 23 million dollars of certified fees paid out to artists, and counting. The W.A.G.E.-model was soon adopted by the Belgian collective SOTA and turned into a `fair practice label'. It spread throughout Europe,

and today, when art workers are invited to do a project, the standard response is no longer `Thank you for the opportunity!' but `How much was the fee, again?' Yet, as fair practice is turning from grass-roots claims into official policy, it is slowly transformed into a neoliberal policy tool used to rebalance the market. And so, we are left to wonder: What is the fairness in fair practice? Can fair practice policies repair the cultural labour market? Or do we need another rallying cry?

In the fifth chapter, *Artists for Basic Income*, I discuss the often-heard dream of an unconditional basic income. During the Covid pandemic, several pilot programs were launched that provided artists with regular cash transfers, and reports show positive results. But basic income is not as easy as it sounds. How much money is a basic income? Who gets it? And who's responsible for paying for it? It gets even thornier when adding art to the mix. What is the role of artists in relation to basic income? Should they be early adopters or solidarity organisers? Moreover, there is also a strong left-wing case against basic income. So, is basic income the one-size-fits-all solution to precarity that people make it out to be?

Thus far, I have used the term `art worker' fifteen times. I like it – its gravitas, both artistically and politically. But what does it mean, exactly? What kind of workers are art workers, if they are workers at all? *Creative Class Consciousness* is a sort of theoretical intermezzo, in which I discuss the art worker's class position and the general confusion about class composition under post-neoliberal capitalism. While these issues might seem academic or trivial, they have serious consequences for the organisation of labour and the representation of workers. Who and what are we? Who are our comrades, and who are our adversaries? How to break the wheel of disorganisation? How to collectivise and resist?

These questions of class-based organising are discussed more pragmatically in the next chapter. *Art as*

Essential Work, co-authored with Mia van den Bos, is about the future of the artist union. There is great momentum. Trade unionism has started to recapture the imagination of workers around the world, at companies like Starbucks and Amazon, as well as in museums. At the same time, the organisation of art workers in disciplined unions with strong claims and bargaining power remains notoriously complex. To shake up the rusty conversations, we have two provocations: art workers should consider themselves as investee activists, and they should organise in needs-based social unions instead of traditional trade unions.

Out of all chapters, *Are Museums Political Organisations?* most clearly shows my background as an art historian. It deals with the sense or mood of institutional nihilism that haunts museums today. As authoritarianism rises around the globe, and art museums fail to take a position against it, art workers with activist leanings are increasingly frustrated. Some think that legacy museums are hopelessly lost in the information overload era. Others argue that they are an integral part of colonial oppression and call for cultural abolition. So, what to do? Burn the museums down and never look back? Although I'm also angry with most museums, I don't think nihilism or cultural abolition work as strategic frameworks. Instead, I think we can try to develop infrastructural critique: an aesthetic as well as material critical practice, which suits any self-respecting museum. To show what this looks like in practice, and how it differs from the empty, declarative politics we often encounter in art, I compare two stories of Free Palestine protests in Dutch museums: a request to loan *Bakunin's Barricade* from the Stedelijk Museum's collection and the exhibition project *Picasso in Palestine* by Khaled Hourani and the Van Abbemuseum.

The People's Free Academy is a reflection on the economic shortcomings of existing art education and how it could be improved. It is the most personal of all chapters in this book, following my development from a failed

art school student, via art history student, to art workers' organiser, and, finally, coming full circle as a researcher at an art academy. It includes encounters with success academies, disenchanted graduates, debt strikes, the rise and fall of the `educational turn', and the promises of Massive Open Online Courses, slowly combining into a personal and fragmented history of the neoliberalisation of art schools. The key questions arising from this story are: Why are we educating so many people into precarity? Can we reorganise art education to address this problem at the root? The chapter ends with a list of ten concrete, actionable propositions towards economically responsible art education.

The penultimate chapter is *Philanthropy Strike*. The decline of public funding makes patronage an increasingly attractive option for art workers and institutions looking for financial stability. There are plenty of big philanthropists willing to sponsor the acquisition of a masterpiece and even more middle-class donors who are thrilled to be a `friend of the museum', support their favourite podcast, or crowdfund a band's first album. With the almost endless potential of donorships, many people hope that a `new culture of giving' can save culture from the collapse of the welfare state. But can it? And if it can, what would be the result? Are there any strings attached? How does the influx of private gifts change the public face of art and the working conditions in the field? Perhaps unsurprisingly, it turns out that philanthropy easily becomes toxic. And yet, it may still be possible to build a truly bottom-up and solidarity-based new culture of giving.

In the last chapter, *Tapping the Pipeline,* Roel Griffioen and I speculate about the convergence of two heterodox economic dreams: commons and cooperatives. Art workers have been talking about commons and commoning ad nauseam over the past twenty years. How can we uphold art, culture, and infrastructures as communal goods, beyond state and market? We've seen endless amounts of experiments with

self-governance and redistribution of little bits of public funding. But lacking in almost each of these initiatives is a solid economic model ensuring longevity and a basic source of income for the workers (who will need to pay their rent, even if we call them `commoners'). So, we have to ask ourselves: what are we governing and redistributing in the first place, and where does the money come from? How should our approach to community- and commons-based art practices shift if we want to foreground economic sustainability? Can the recent rise of cultural cooperativism provide a more solid financial base?

Throughout this book, you will encounter words with dotted underlining. This indicates that the entity in question is included in the *Glossary of Important Practices*. The glossary is an alphabetically ordered list of more than 150 initiatives, models, collectives, and organisations that somehow redefine the social and economic rules of the art world. These range from self-organised gift circles to policy instruments, from pirate libraries to artivist groups, from crypto experiments to alternative education initiatives, and much more. Each entry consists of short descriptions and, sometimes, references to related entries. I hope that, brought together into one place, the entries of the glossary show that there are many and real alternatives to the broken art economy.

A TOOLBOX WITHOUT SOLUTIONS

My emphasis on economic questions may be deceptive. Sure enough, the problem of precarity is deeply ingrained in our economic system. But the strategic considerations I try bringing into focus are primarily about the forms of collective *organisation* – from production to trade, and from bargaining to action – that may improve the material conditions of work in the arts. They shed light on the conditions under which social unions may or may not work, the types of basic income campaigns that make sense, the

possibilities and limitations of cultural co-operatives, and so on. The historical analyses, case studies, and theoretical reflections are meant to add up to practical, actionable insight. Even the more theoretical and speculative chapters are meant to enhance your sense of position and purpose. Hopefully, the next time your normie uncle scolds your career choices at a birthday party, you will be better equipped to put him in his right place. In short, the book you are holding is meant to be a strategy toolbox. A source of inspiration for all the artists, designers, museum guards, curators, writers, tour guides, art handlers, and other art workers who want to change the system they live and work in, collectively.

However, I have to warn against my own deceptiveness once more. The word `toolbox' might give the impression that I have found clear-cut solutions to the problem of precarity. I did not. On the contrary, I believe that there is no magic solution or one-size-fits-all model. This sobriety is partially informed by a feeling I developed as an organiser: if there were a silver bullet, we would have used it long ago. But more than relying on my own hunch, I'm following Rodrigo Nunes's visionary book *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal*. This book is a deep study of the forms of political organising that emerged from the cycle of struggles that we could call the `Occupy moment', around 2011. Nunes dissects the curious, spontaneous philosophy of `horizontalism' that emerged in these mobilisations, how it was rooted in the earlier movements of 1968 and the early 2000s, and how it is opposed to the other, `vertical' perspective on organising that was established in 1917. Analysing the resulting impasse between the two contemporary Lefts, he draws lessons that all organisers should take to heart.

After the Russian revolution of 1917, leftist organising was structured vertically, in political parties with strong leaders and unions that sought to unite all workers of the world, build power, and contribute to the world

revolution that was, in those days, thought to be the inevitable destination of history. However, as we now know, the vertically organised revolutionary movements failed to overthrow capitalism, and many on the left grew disenchanted with actually existing socialism once they saw how it unfolded in the Soviet Union. It is therefore not surprising that the social movements of the post-1968 New Left, the alterglobalists of the early 2000s, and, to an even greater extent, the mobilisations of the 2011 movements, tried a radically different, horizontal approach. They replaced hierarchy, representation, party programs, and strategic institution-building with autonomy, tactical direct action, presentism, assemblies, decentralised networks, and a general distrust of organisation as such. As we now know, though, the horizontalist approaches also failed for their own reasons. Almost none of the 2011 mobilisations managed to scale up from square occupations into serious, long-term movements with institutional footholds, capable of creating material change.

Nunes argues that the defeats of both sides have led to the establishment of two Lefts, each with its own accusations of the other side for being wrong, and each becoming more orthodox every time they see the other side fail. `Team 1917' accuses `Team 1968' of betraying the proletariat, forgetting about the revolution, giving in to identity and folk politics, and being addicted to failure; while `Team 1968' accuses `Team 1917' of being reductive, authoritarian, old-fashioned, blind to new forms of oppression, and addicted to failure. If you have spent any time in activist circles, these repetitive, frustrating discussions probably haunt your dreams forever. The problem is: both sides are right about the other's failures, but wrong about the conclusion that their own perspective is therefore correct. Neither the vertical nor the horizontal orthodoxy has served organisers very well.

To escape this negative spiral, Nunes argues for an approach that he calls `networked Leninism'. This is not a

definitive synthesis of horizontalism and verticalism. On the contrary, networked Leninism is the realisation that the tension between horizontalism and verticalism is inevitable, and that organising consists in continuous mediation. As Nunes writes, "there is no form that could [...] be the solution `at last discovered' to the problem of how to organise. Forces are living, variable things; they demand constant management, adjustment; that is why no position about organisation could be correct for all situations and times."[4] In each situation and at each time, we must find a good dose of autonomy as well as an effective degree of coordination, space for tactical spontaneity as well as sufficient strategic oversight, and so on. In short, organising is not effective because it is absolutely correct, but because it is smart, rigorous, and adaptive to forces around it. Thus, if the Left wants to attain real victories against capitalism, both verticalists and horizontalists need to overcome their addictions to orthodoxy, heroic failure, and infighting, and commit to a continuous, pragmatic, and sober organisation debate.

4 Nunes, *Neither Vertical Nor Horizontal,* 2021, p. 286.

Nunes's general insights on organisation fully apply to organising art workers, too. Therefore, in this book, I follow neither conservative Marxist doctrines nor the strong art world tendency toward folk politics and hyperlocalism. I believe that art workers need representation, organised power, and institutions, even beyond the belief that there is any single, ultimate model to achieve this. So, even if the book you hold is a toolbox, it is a toolbox without solutions.

For at least one good reason, letting go of the fiction of a single solution should come as a relief: beyond solutionism, there is a vast amount of contextual, lived strategic lessons. We can learn these lessons from the organising work against precarity that art workers already do, driven by material need as much as political commitment. People set up a studio space cooperative because they

have no other place to work, they develop an artist fee guideline because they need money to survive, and so on. Through these collective actions, art workers tend to discover or develop collective values. They try to change the system they operate within by directly practising solidarity, care, trust, sustainability, decolonisation, and mutual aid on a community level, as well as, eventually, by setting up trade unions and joining the cultural committees of political parties. The object of post-capitalist imaginaries in the arts – let's call it the solidarity economy – is therefore not an abstract entity. It is a collective creation, the result of a manifold politics of doing. It is also for this reason that the book you're holding contains so many chapters with ideas that differ widely and sometimes even contradict one another. In my limited understanding, this is the only way to go: trying out different tactics and strategies, thought through with care and enacted with full political commitment, and seeing what works.

The result will not be a unitary blueprint. Yet, it may offer something better, and I would even say more useful: a set of strategic principles to inform the continuous management and adjustment of art workers' organising. In a normal book, this kind of general insight would be presented in a conclusion. But since this book is, after all, a toolbox, I will share them upfront.

ORGANISING PRINCIPLES

For one, the effectiveness of organising efforts is often determined by their ability to switch between self-organisation and systemic political action. All too often, initiatives operating under the banner of solidarity and inclusivity turn out to be instances of `art world activism' whose primary aim is not material change but the accumulation of cultural capital. Some `organisers' come away with a guerrilla exhibition under their belt or some new followers on Insta, but don't really care if anything else

changes. In other cases, the people involved are so preoccupied with the urgencies and practical affairs of self-organisation that they forget about politicisation and end up supporting rather than fighting neoliberal policy. This is, for instance, the case when artists redevelop the properties of private investors, in which they are given temporary studio spaces. On the other hand, grand ideas about systemic change or political demands are often declared without the necessary follow-up action of organising, like calling for a basic income but not actually doing anything to make it more likely to happen. Even when successful, lobbying often ends up entangled in the paper reality of policymaking, resulting in unsatisfactory compromises or worse, turning art workers into Guinea pigs in policy experiments. It's hard to decide when to engage with governments to secure material victories and when to opt for productive withdrawal. Yet this is exactly what the most effective organisations manage to do. They navigate the minefield and challenge the capitalist status quo by moving between the urgencies of self-organisation, on the one hand, and political strategy, on the other.

5 Edelbek, `Why Must Artists Be Poor?', 2016.

Furthermore, even if the income position of art workers is central in this book, it feels universally important to steer clear of `business innovation'. Every so often, a start-up is launched that claims to provide a one-size-fits-all solution for poor artists. In 2016, the musician and entrepreneur Hadi Eldebek gave the TED Talk `Why Must Artists Be Poor?' In it, he launched GrantPA, an online platform that uses technology to match artists with grants and funding opportunities in a way that's "easy, fast, and less intimidating".[5] As far as I can tell, the project never went anywhere. (Could it be because matchmaking is no solution to systemic exploitation?) But others kept trying. In 2025, writer and entrepreneur Yancey Strickler gave the TED Talk `Forget Hustle Culture'. In it, he launched the A-Corp model. He explained this `artist corporation' as "a

company, but built for how creative people work," based on collective ownership and protocolised redistribution.[6] (If this sounds like a rebranding of the co-operative model, that's because it is.) Do you start to see the pattern?

6 Strickler, `Forget Hussle Culture', 2025. Strickler took his ideas further than Edelbek ever managed. The principles of the A-Corp model have been implemented in the platform Metalabel, which has carved out a carefully curated niche in the visual internet culture market and built a lot of clout in the past few years.

7 The notion of the `institution of the common' has no clear single origin or definition, but the trilogy *Empire, Commonwealth,* and *Multitude* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt has definitely contributed to its broader adoption.

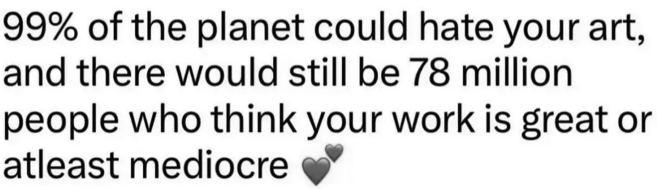
The art market often sees disruptive (digital) ventures aiming to emancipate the artist as a serious player in the game of speculation and value capture. Sometimes this works remarkably well for some artists. But sooner or later, the real benefits of these disruptions end up with the One Percent. There are many examples, from Kickstarter to Patreon, and the fascinating case of the Artist Pension Trust. But the clearest example is the NFT market, which promised to emancipate previously underprivileged artists. Reports show that the NFT market, after the initial boom in 2021 and 2022, has consolidated at 1.2 billion dollars in 2023 (54 times smaller than the art market) and is almost entirely dominated by legacy art market institutions and crypto traders (the infamous whales). In this book, I'm not looking at ways in which individuals make the art market or gig economy work for them, because it never does.

Instead, the stories, ideas, and practices gathered here point toward collective forms of action. This implies, first, a fundamental dedication to art and culture as a public good or, to borrow an idea from Italian comrades, the involvement of art in building the institutions of the common.[7] Yet, at a time when art and culture have no self-evident social license (we all have had conversations

in which people ask why art and culture should be funded in the first place), dedication to art as a public good also implies a keen eye for coalitions and movement-building. It is striking how the most effective actions against precarity, nearly without exception, break down the boundaries of the art world. Whether it is in a social union with delivery riders, in an art for UBI campaign, or in collaboration with a local food co-operative, we need broader coalitions, and we need them now.

Finally, I try adhering to the most basic principle for effective organising: we must act within our realm of influence. Because organising power starts with acting up and is accelerated by victories, small material changes close to home are more valuable than a grand statement without follow-up. In fact, making the horrible career decision to work in the arts is an excellent start. It has become popular to point out that attending art school is the result of privilege, which it often is. But it can be much more: a demand for an impossible economy, a training for an otherwise, a search for new collectivities, an act of resistance against political and cultural repression, a bridge cast over the abyss of nothingness. This book celebrates small victories, such as our poor life decisions, and builds from there.

I hope the chapters in this book will be fun to read. (Why would we have art if we're not allowed to play?) But there will be darker passages, with occasional hard-to-swallow pills. So, if, while reading, you ever think that you really fucked up by becoming an artist (or whatever other horrible profession you choose), remember the wise words of @artreviewpower100:


99% of the planet could hate your art,
and there would still be 78 million
people who think your work is great or
atleast mediocre 💕

HOW TO BE STRATEGIC ABOUT ART WORKERS' ORGANISING WHILE THE WORLD IS ON FIRE?

ART IN PERMACRISIS: ON THE NECESSITY OF RADICAL IMAGINATION

"One does not drive to the limits for a thrill experience, or because limits are dangerous and sexy, or because it brings us into a titillating proximity with evil. One asks about the limits of ways of knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives."
Judith Butler, *What Is Critique?*

"The best indicator of the left's lack of trust in itself today is its fear of crisis. A true left takes a crisis seriously, without illusions."
Slavoj Žižek, *A Permanent Economic Emergency*

"Eat, crisis, repeat."
Laura Mrkša

"Crisis? What crisis?"
Supertramp

Since the Covid pandemic, there is a lingering, or even growing, sense that we live in a time of crisis. The highly anticipated `new normal' never appeared. Instead, we have been confronted with climate collapse, war in Ukraine, war in Sudan, genocide in Palestine, global trade conflicts, the scramble for rare earth materials, inflation, widespread misinformation, housing shortages, the staggering rise of authoritarianism, and geopolitical tensions of such overwhelming dimensions that people start talking of `Cold War II'. These crises are like the heads of a Hydra. Every time one is defeated, it reemerges with doubled force, scarier than ever. This multiplicity has been widely described as a `polycrisis': a system-wide

instability, where one crisis compounds another, creating a scenario far more complex than any single issue alone.[1] It's not just that several crises happen at once. Neoliberal austerity, fossil capitalism, and green transition are tightly entangled, making the crisis landscape self-reinforcing and adaptively evolving. The real peril lies in how these crises converge, driving a cascading global instability that eludes conventional, siloed policy responses, and that may accelerate the emergence of a new world order.[2]

The interlinked nature of today's crises has also been interpreted, even more dramatically, as a `metacrisis'. While a polycrisis refers to a convergence of several crises happening at the same time and compounding one another, the concept of metacrisis goes deeper. It asks: Why are all these crises happening in the first place? Could it be that there is a singular (spiritual) root crisis – a metacrisis? Is it possible that our worldviews, values, institutions, and ways of relating to the planet and each other are so fundamentally flawed that we simply cannot map or understand the immense complexity of the problems, or the way they are accelerated by technological developments?

1 Tooze, `Chartbook #130 Defining Polycrisis', 2022.

2 Denvir in conversation with Alami and Sahay, `New World Order', 2025.

3 Schmachtenberger, `An Introduction to the Metacrisis', 2023.

According to the people who believe this metacrisis, the very systems that we have built and operate are leading us into a civilisation breakdown.[3] The diagnosis of our times that I'm most fond of can be summarised in the paradoxical notion of `permacrisis'. More than its siblings, polycrisis and metacrisis, the idea of permacrisis brings home the point that we should let go of any hopes that present-day crises are temporary. We must instead learn to live with crises stacking up ever higher in front of our door or, God forbid, sometimes even disturbing our comfort inside.

As a sentiment, catalysed by the Covid pandemic, the present-day permacrisis is reminiscent of the 1980s `no

future'. Back then, the Zeitgeist was dominated by the economic recession and the Cold War fear of total nuclear annihilation. No Future became the motto of the punk generation's subculture. After all, even if there's nothing to look forward to, there's still everything to rebel against – and there is fun to be had. Today, atomic warfare is back on the disaster menu, alongside genocide, housing shortages, truth collapse, and climate catastrophe. It is hard to believe that anything good can come from this, given the ineptitude of the political ruling class to act upon or even acknowledge the full extent of our problems. The grandiose `Great Reset' rolled out during Covid quickly turned out to be a farce, leading to discontent, conspiracy theories, and a broadly shared ominous feeling that new crises could hit at any moment. In fact, they are probably already hitting, and we might or might not learn about them in the future. Crises are simultaneously huge, omnipresent, paralysing, and minor, forgettable events, data blips in the age of information overload. Ecocide has already happened, and heat death is baked into our future. But who cares? The logic of late capitalism has turned into *too late capitalism*. We live through the "contradictory moment where the overmuchness of lateness arrests itself. Future-eclipsed, present-immanetised, `Step on it!' immediacy."[4] It is too late. Permacrisis is here.

4 Kornbluh, *Immediacy*, 2023, p. 13.

5 Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 2013.

The notion of permacrisis is, of course, self-contradictory. `Crisis' is derived from the ancient Greek `κρίνειν,' meaning to judge, decide, or separate. It describes a decisive and irreversible change in the state of the world, which requires the establishment of a new normalcy. But if the crisis is permanent, there is no more normalcy and, it follows, no more crisis either. Anything or everything could be a crisis. This is exactly the state of permacrisis: a blurring of the opposition between crisis and normalcy, to the extent criris became norm and norm became

crisis. The effect of this contradictory state on art and imagination is, unsurprisingly, contradictory as well. On the one hand, permacrisis makes art feel more frivolous and futile than ever. But we shall see that, at the very same time, the paralysing, future-devouring force of permacrisis only increases the necessity of radical imagination.

CRISIS? WHAT CRISIS?

There is a risk in diagnosing permacrisis. The notion of crisis may inflate to the point of meaninglessness. If everything is a crisis, nothing is a crisis. Even worse, it may instill a sense of defeatism. If the universe is an inherent disaster machine, what is the point of even trying to organise positive change? This kind of discursive inflation or defeatism is, of course, not what I am after. On the contrary, my point is to understand the collective paralysis induced by permacrisis as a deliberate result of permacrisis management and class warfare from above. To this end, it is useful to take a step back and ask: what is really being talked about when we talk about crises? What is special or distinctive about a crisis? And how does the designation of the term crisis change material reality? In other words, what is the political function of crisis?

In the book *Anti-Crisis,* Janet Roitman studied the various narratives that sought to retroactively explain the 2007-2008 financial crash; the series of events that was, until a few years ago, simply referred to as `the crisis'. In this study, Roitman shows how crisis, as an object of knowledge ascribed to material reality, is an important governmental tool.[5] Crisis is an alienation of history, a discrepancy between the way things are and the way things ought to be. Something went wrong. Critique, which is the judgment of the flaw, is the construction of a crisis narrative. The person or institution that declares the state of crisis thereby posits the need for an otherwise that should become the new normal and the `unprecedented' change

required to achieve this. However, this change is always pre-defined and no longer open to discussion. The epistemological or, depending on one's view, metaphysical proof of why an occurrence is a deviation from the true or right course of history is never provided. Would it have been truer to history if subprime mortgages in the US had never been financialised? Who is to say?

6 The discontents caused by this misleading rhetoric of radical change are evident from the conspiracy theories triggered by the Great Reset.

7 Hui Kyong Chun, `Crisis, Crisis, Crisis, or Sovereignty and Networks', 2011, p. 91.

8 Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, 2007.

9 Žižek, `Hermeneutic Delirium', 2009.

In the absence of crisis-defining evidence, the most powerful opinions rule. It is then easy to understand why corporations and governments employ large numbers of risk assessors and managers. Their core function is not to help predict or prevent crises but to provide the required legitimacy for crisis management once the opportunity presents itself in a natural disaster, pandemic, war, or economic recession. Whenever an alleged crisis hits, these bureaucrats quickly set the parameters of change while selected elements of the old normalcy remain in place. We have witnessed such operations with the bailout of the banks during the financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the World Economic Forum's Great Reset during the Covid pandemic. Previously unimaginable measures were taken in both of these cases, such as the bailing out of banks and the creation of Eurobonds. However, direct causes of these crises were left unchanged and remain `normal', such as the availability of high-leverage debt ratios and the lack of a globally equitable vaccination system, of which the richest countries bear the costs. Thus, crisis management is used to first create the possibility of `radical' or `unprecedented' change, but then to immediately bring back a state of controlled `safety'.[6] "Crises are not accidental to a culture

focused on safety, they are its raison d'être," Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes.[7] Crisis is the norm because management needs it to be so.

The observation that capitalism needs the creative destruction of crises is, in itself, not groundbreaking. Naomi Klein already coined the term `disaster capitalism' in 2007. She argued that neoliberal economists have developed a strategy of shock therapy, in which natural crises, disasters, or wars are invariably used to implement further privatisation and deregulation.[8] Slavoj Žižek nicely summarised this baseline Marxist analysis when he described late capitalism as a perpetual motion machine of crisis:

> [Capitalism's] dynamics of perpetual self-revolutionising relies on the endless postponing of its point of impossibility (final crisis, collapse). What is for other, earlier, modes of production a dangerous exception, is for capitalism a sort of normality: crisis is in capitalism somehow internalized, taken into account, as the point of impossibility which pushes it to continuous activity. Capitalism is always structurally in crisis – this is why it is expanding all the time: it can only reproduce itself by way of `borrowing from the future,' by way of escaping into the future. The final settling of accounts when all its debts would have been paid cannot ever arrive.[9]

Capitalism's reliance on crisis as the norm is thus a well-known and well-studied phenomenon, and the political logic of disaster-driven shock doctrine has been tried and perfected for decades. Thus, rather than a radical break with previous capitalist regimes, permacrisis is an intensification of capitalism's dependence on disaster. The intensity and pace of crises that capitalism requires to continuously rejuvenate are accelerating to the point that a qualitatively different condition has been reached. I will go deeper into

these changes later on. For now, though, it suffices to observe that the state of paralysis induced by permacrisis should be understood as a deliberate political strategy.

As I already mentioned briefly, this political era of permacrisis has two important, but contradictory implications for art and art work. On the one hand, permacrisis has undeniably marginalised the position of art and made work in the arts more precarious. It has undermined the trust in art as a social good and redefined the governance of art in instrumental, or even apologetic, terms. On the other hand, the inherent instability of permacrisis management, its dependence on borrowing from the future, and its tendency to instill a sense of collective paralysis may provide art workers with a clear sense of social, political, and aesthetic purpose. If capitalism depends on the capacity to borrow from the future, the power of fabulating different futures becomes a crucial battleground. Art can defend and ultimately expand the otherwise shrinking space of radical imagination, where the seeming inevitability of intensifying capitalist extraction, shock after shock, crisis upon crisis, can be contested and overcome.

ART IN PERMACRISIS

Let's start with the hard-to-swallow pill. Permacrisis places art workers in a pickle. The economy of the arts is notoriously unsustainable. But aren't there many, undeniably more relevant, crises? How can we talk about `solidarity' in art production among a small group of privileged people in a world wrought by so many crises simultaneously? The social legitimacy of art, which has always been precarious, erodes even faster under these conditions, taking blows from every side. To the Left, it is the bourgeois privilege of virtue hoarders, to conservatives, a hobby of wokies, and to liberals, a passion-driven dream job (which is its own reward and therefore needs no monetary compensation).[10] Art workers, painfully aware of their limited,

mere human capacities, are left disoriented and disillusioned.[11] In the words of artist Maisa Imamović: we are "always doomed to feel guilty in our own unique way".[12] Should we maybe, once again, declare the end of art – this time, not as a fulfillment of the dialectics of history, but as a minor casualty to the permacrisis?

10 Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 2021.

11 Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do*, 2024.

12 Imamović, `1902 Words of Guilt', 2020.

13 For example, Boekman Foundation, the Dutch national knowledge center for art, culture, and policy, organised a congress on `The Value of Art after Covid' in June 2022. See: https://www.boekman.nl/activiteit/landelijk-congres-de-waarde-van-cultuur-na-corona.

Fortunately, art workers largely reject this kind of Abendlandish fatalism. But what are the alternatives? Even if the precarity of art feels like a daunting or futile issue to take on under these circumstances, many have tried. Anyone who has spent some time on the policy side will undoubtedly have noticed the endless debates about the supposed `real value of art', which inevitably end up with the conclusion that art is socially indispensable in some way or another.[13] These narratives come in different flavours, tailored to different types of critique. To some, art is an important part of their national identity; to others, an essential tool of Bildung; an autonomous zone; a comforting refuge; or a catalyst of critical reflection. However, the slow collapse of Western welfare states has eroded the self-evidence of art as a public good, deserving of government support, and made these arguments less convincing. In this vacuum, the creative industries paradigm has risen to dominance, which proposes art and culture as a profitable and `impactful' endeavour for the `social good' instead of a social good in their own right. The precarious social legitimacy of art puts it at the mercy of crisis management, which in turn leads to the instrumentalisation of art in fighting other crises.

Although very different, all of these arguments are of an apologetic nature. They ask the powers that be to finally acknowledge the *real* value of art (and, even in the case of creative industries lobbying, to translate this acknowledgement into funding). The value of art is thus determined by the competence to respond to an agenda of urgencies determined by the party that declares the crises – usually a government, with or without support from consultants, lobbyists, and scientists. These apologies have not proven to be very useful for art workers. The numbers show that forty years of resilience programs focusing on creative industry development, cultural entrepreneurship, and the instrumental value of art have not managed to improve the income position of art workers at all.[14] But the apologetic regime has established a firm grip on what we might call permacrisis management.

14 UNESCO, `Empowering Creativity', 2023.

15 Aldovisi, `Cultural Autonomy as a Political Practice', 2026.

16 Khaldi, Khalili, and Arsanion, `What We Talk About When We Talk About Crisis: Part 1', 2020.

17 Anani, `The Genocide War on Gaza', 2024.

18 The former Yugoslav region fell out of the crisis economy as Western funders deemed the situation `normalised' around the mid-2000s. Despite their foundation as, among other things, proxies of liberalism, independent cultural scenes like the one in Zagreb, Croatia, have developed into strong opposition to the rise of authoritarianism in the region. I've written about this scene in *Scenes of Independence: Cultural Ruptures in Zagreb (1991-2016)* (Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017).

19 See: Horvat and Štiks, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism*, 2014.

20 Khaldi, Khalili, and Arsanion, `What We Talk About When We Talk About Crisis: Part 2', 2020.

21 Reyburn, `Is the Art World Choosing to Ignore a Wider World in Crisis?', 2024.

The clearest example I know of is the neoliberal donor economy launched in the so-called developing countries of the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the

violent disintegration of Yugoslavia, and the Oslo Accords. In Palestine and Lebanon, Western governments and private funds launched a series of outreach programs, which had a profound impact on the infrastructure and economy of these countries. After visiting cultural organisations on the West Bank in 2025, the Italian activist and cultural worker Federico Aldovisi reported: "Palestinian people built roads, hospitals, political parties, new cultural institutions, but the reality is that today 80% of the Palestinian population depends on that economy [of foreign aid] to survive."[15] To gain access to the foreign aid money, previously informal cultural organisations have founded NGOs, started working with the neoliberal metrics of impact (mainly visitor numbers), and shifted their focus from inherently political community-based work to aesthetic `contemporaneity'.[16] As a result, "culture became domesticated by foreign funding and was unable to carry out its critical role in taking a position in the face of the occupation", according to Rana Anani.[17]

A similar development took place at the same time in the former Eastern Bloc and Yugoslavia, where the Open Society Foundation founded a series of NGOs that still exist today and have established `independent cultural scenes.'[18] This economy functions through an endless cycle of English-language grant writing, in which crisis has become a defining criterion.[19] The more convincingly the applicant NGO argues that they are affected by various crises, like free speech infringements or repression based on identity, the more likely it is to receive money. In the `crisis economy,' being in the right crisis equals the right to exist.[20] Equally, being in or speaking of the wrong crisis can result in defunding.[21]

RADICAL IMAGINATION

Now, like any system of governance, the crisis economy and its management are a system of push and pull in

which participants can find agency. Its patterns can be studied, not just to participate successfully but also to beat the funders at their own game. If we can safely assume that the next crisis will be declared soon and a small window of opportunity will open, art workers can try to be ready – and be the first to strike. Any period between times of turmoil can be used to develop the tools that might come in useful, like safe houses, common pots, networks, governance systems, websites, research, and so on.[22] In the words of science fiction author and leftist agitator Cory Doctorow:

> Milton Friedman knew the future was up for grabs, and that in crisis, `ideas lying around' moved from periphery to center in an eyeblink. Two can play that game: imagining a better future is a way to seize that future, and sadly, we are in for innumerable crises where our `ideas lying around' can come to the fore.[23]

This tactical approach is, by the way, by no means a cynical argument, but a serious acceptance of political urgency. To cite Žižek once more: "Although crises are painful and dangerous, they are inevitable, and they are the terrain on which battles have to be waged and won."[24] The future of both art workers and the social license of culture depends on our positioning in these battles.

22 These tactics were formulated by Khalili in conversation with Cubria and Eckenhaussen, `Art in Permacrisis #4', 2024.

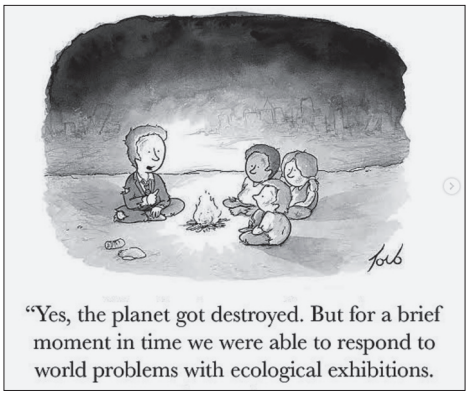
23 Cory Doctorow about `The World after Amazon'. See: https://afteramazon.world.

24 Žižek, `A Permanent Economic Emergency', 2010.

25 Haiven, *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*, 2014.

Doctorow's emphasis on imagination is important because permacrisis erodes the very human capacity to imagine. As discussed earlier, capital's rejuvenation today functions through continuous internal revolutions, using the instability caused by the internal contradictions of capitalism as a stabilising factor. Only capital can save us from capital, or so it claims. Therefore, crisis and

radical change have become ideologically synonymous with renewed exploitation. Thus, "the crisis we face today is not simply economic or political. It is a crisis of the imagination", as Max Haiven wrote in *Crises of Imagination, Crises of Power*. "We are unable to imagine a world other than the one we have. This is the triumph of capitalism: not only to exploit us, but to strangle our capacity to imagine alternatives."[25]


"Yes, the planet got destroyed. But for a brief moment in time we were able to respond to world problems with ecological exhibitions.

Anonymous, based on a cartoon by Tom Toro, titled The Planet Got Destroyed.

In the book *Immediacy: Or, the Style of Too-late Capitalism*, Anna Kornbluh diagnoses this crisis of imagination as the rise to dominance of `immediacy'. While capital continues to rely on crises, the future it borrows from is disappearing. Temporality is increasingly eclipsed by near-total nowness. No more past to build on. No more alternative to imagine. No future, once again. The victory of total presence. The resentment toward mediation, which characterises too-late capitalism and is evident in `just in time' logistics, next-day shipping, the rise of social media (facilitating direct connections), and hyperpolitics (street protests over union memberships), has also infiltrated culture. We want on-demand TV, autofiction, immersive art experiences, and immediately monetisable NFTs. In the disintermediated style of

too-late capitalism, there is no more room for reflection, critique, boredom, or dreaming.

The philosopher Byung-Chul Han makes a similar analysis of the present-day media landscape. He speaks of a `crisis of narration'. Storytelling has been replaced by storyselling. That is to say, the content that feels like a story is actually immediate emotional manipulation; political or corporate propaganda. Social media dissolves meaningful connections of the past and future into a continuous flow of fragmented presents. Not connection or healing pain, but data generation and reproduction of the capitalist status quo is the goal. Because we can no longer tell our own stories, ultimately, we lose ourselves. Homo Sapiens is replaced by Fomo Sapiens.[26]

26 Han, *The Crisis of Narration*, 2024.

At the same time, the cracks in the totality of capitalist ideology are multiplying. We are, after all, in permacrisis. And with the acknowledgement of crisis as a governance tool, the possibility emerges to think beyond apologetic responses and tactical appropriations. We might start formulating a strategic counter-position to reclaim the narration and mediation that render another world imaginable – let's call it an apocritique. Can we, the art workers, find the legitimacy and power to make our own history? One which is anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist? The practice Haiven, among many others, proposes to develop this apocritique is one of `radical imagination': the collective power of the people to reject the narrowing scope of capitalist realism. Radical imagination is always manifest in struggle and emotional expression. We can see it wherever the people create other forms of worldbuilding together, in street and university protests, Indigenous uprisings, pirate care networks, and, in many cases, in art. The drive for radical imagination, I believe, is the reason why we are seeing so many LARPS and games, future scenario departments, investigative aesthetics, DAOs, and other artistic projects centring on speculative

politics in the arts, coupled in varying degrees with political organising and movement-building. The power of the people to make their own histories and imagine their own futures will also be an implicit red thread throughout the rest of this book.

Radical imagination might feel like a luxury. But if it is, as I suspect, our most promising form of apocritique – our way to resist, reject, and replace permacrisis management – it actually is a strategic necessity. In the past decades, the societal role of art has come to be understood as aimed at direct social engagement and impact. But even if this is important, it is not enough. We need art to reclaim imagination, strategise, and stake out visions toward a survivable future, at a time when politicians, managers, and corporations fail to do so. This is, moreover, a way to practice politically engaged art that resists the capture of instrumentalisation. People need artistic qualities to foster radical imagination, without which it is impossible to fight capital. Art workers need radical imagination to define their own history, without which reclaiming the legitimacy of art as a social good is impossible. As long as we know that we need each other, we need no excuses.

CAN FAIR PAYMENT REGULATIONS REPAIR THE CULTURAL LABOUR MARKET?

OR DO WE NEED ANOTHER POLICY FRAMEWORK?

PAYMENT
FOR
ART
WORK:
`FAIR PRACTICE'
AND THE
END
OF
FREE
LABOUR

"Art world math is volunteering
for 5+ years to be paid minimum wage."
@freeze_magazine

"Did my poverty help my creativity? Uh, no."
Orson Welles

In the book *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capital,* Bojana Kunst tells a fascinating anecdote about the labour politics of Marina Abramović.[1] The world's most famous and successful performance artist was invited to direct the 2011 Modern Art Gala in the Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles. With this yearly event, the museum entertains its biggest donors with a top-of-the-bill contemporary art experience. Tickets range from 25 thousand to 100 thousand dollars. In response to the invitation, Abramović decided to transform the traditional dinner set-up into a total performance installation. She invited local performance artists and asked them to perform during the dinner. They were to sit still on rotating chairs under the tables with only their heads sticking out, serving the guests the severed (but living) heads. Others were instructed to lie fully naked on rotating platforms atop the biggest dining tables, so as to become the live centerpieces of the night. Instead of observing an art piece like one is typically used to in a museum, guests of the Gala could fully immerse themselves in the performance environment, maybe even become part of it – while enjoying a lavish meal.

1 Kunst, *Artist at Work*, 2012, pp. 39-40.

One candidate performer, Sarah Wookey, revealed the conditions under which these people were expected to work. They were required to participate in fifteen hours of rehearsals. Then, on the day of the event itself, they were expected to perform for four hours without breaks. They were to do this naked, silently, and ignoring any physical

or verbal harassment. Abramović calls this `performance mode'. For all the work, performers would be paid a total sum of 150 dollars. Also, a Non-Disclosure Agreement was to be signed, stating that if a performer spoke to anyone about what happened in the audition, they would be sued for 1 million dollars plus attorney fees.

Outraged by the preposterous conditions, Wookey rejected the gig and made a public statement about it on social media. The reveal caused enough public outrage to be remembered, at the very least in some books. But master storyteller Abramović was not impressed. In a lecture for local university students, the artist explained that she found her critics misinformed and narrow-minded. They, allegedly, did not understand the joy shared among the performers, the satirical nature of the artwork, or the anti-puritan quality of performance art, as such. She also stressed that it was highly unjust to accuse her, the daughter of a socialist Yugoslav partisan and general, of exploitation.

Even if it is laughably outrageous, we know that this is not an exceptional story. The exploitation of (freelance) workers by institutions is normalised to the extent that even artists reproduce it. But there is pushback. Over the past decade, people have started calling out exploitative labour relationships for how they appear in the most direct sense: unfair. And with these outcries of indignation, a call has risen for *fair* practice. With great success. More than any other advocacy for better working conditions in the arts, the idea of `fair practice' has encouraged serious policy changes, leading to the biggest improvement in art workers' conditions of the past decade.

The exact demands of fair practice differ from place to place, but the core is always the same. No more payment for exposure or opportunities. No more crumbs at the bottom of the budget. Fair payment for labour instead. A general lack of money in the sector is no longer an excuse for underpayment. Secondary benefits are no longer an excuse for underpayment. The tools of fair practice follow a

stable, general logic. With bottom-up campaigns, art workers introduce artist fee guidelines, fair practice codes, affordable insurance schemes, transparent contracts, and other tools to normalise better working conditions. Such codes and calculators have been launched in Belgium, the UK, the Netherlands, and across Scandinavian countries. Grassroots action against underpayment is also ongoing in Italy, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In many cases, these efforts have directly and significantly improved the situation of independent art workers, and changed the norms and expectations around payment for art work. Today, when art workers are invited to do a project, the standard response is no longer "Thank you for the opportunity!", but "How much was the fee, again?".

However, the notion of `fair practice', as it is implemented, is also seriously limited. This became apparent to me when I worked for the small Dutch artist association Platform BK from 2020 until 2023. Next to supporting grassroots organising, we would participate in the circuits of NGO meetings and policy agenda setting, and as such be involved in the development of fair practice policy. Fundamentally, the conversations always revolved around how to make the labour market `fairer'. Better fees and transparent contracts lead to better negotiations, support for young artists allows them to grow into the market, and so on. In other words, fair practice tries to make the labour market function as it should. But what if the arts, as a labour `market', is beyond repair by design? While much better than the reign of stereotypes like the `genius artists' who can live off nothing, or the tyranny of structurelessness, the regime of fair practice leads to inevitable contradictions once turned into protocols. This makes for an interesting strategic question. How useful is the idea of fair practice today? And when is it time to move on to a new rallying cry?

CONFUSED POLICY

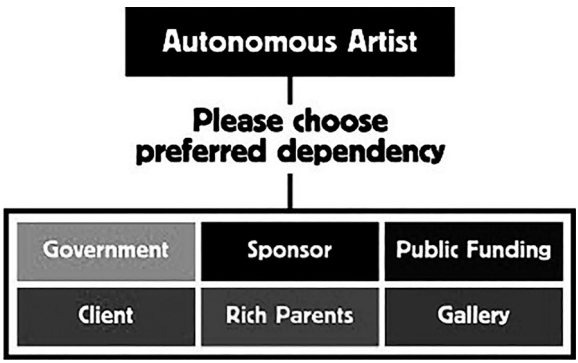
On 28 October 1980, the 21st General Conference of UNESCO in Belgrade observed the "need to improve the social security, labour and tax conditions of the artist" and formulated the `Recommendation concerning the Status of the Artist'.[2] The recommendation encouraged member states to create `the material conditions facilitating the release of creative talent'. The proposed measures included universal access to culture, promotion of consumption of culture, improved vocational training for artists, funding programmes for artists and art institutions, artistic copyright law enforcement, income support for emerging artists, artist fee regulations, the creation of `decent' side jobs for artists, maintenance of cultural infrastructure, tax exemptions for commissions, sales, and imports of artworks, free or affordable insurances for artists, stimulation of international cooperation, freedom of international travel for artists, protection of child artists, and extra support for women artists and artists with minority backgrounds. The recommendation was accepted with the unanimous support of the member states.

2 UNESCO, `Recommendation Concerning the Status of the Artist', 1980.

3 Neil, *Culture & Working Conditions for Artists*, 2019, p. 6.

In 2018, almost 40 years after the 1980 Recommendation took effect, UNESCO commissioned an international survey to monitor its structural effects. One sentence from this report is often triumphantly cited by critics of the art economy, myself included: "The largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour."[3] However, apart from the thrill of affirmation, the document gives little reason to be triumphant. It reports that some progress has been made in digital copyright, social security for artists in the global south, regional collaborations, and anti-gender gap policies. But

structural problems have only grown. Artists still struggle with low and uncertain payment, pension poverty, censorship, and a large, persistent gender pay gap. Furthermore, artists today are facing restricted access to opportunities because of platform monopolies, digital surveillance, and increasingly violent anti-migration policies. These problems occur everywhere, but they are the worst in the Global South. In short, the researchers observed a near-complete failure of governments to implement policy ensuring the basic security of artists. But this is not all we can learn from the comparison of these reports from 1980 and 2018.



Yuri Veerman, *Autonomous Artist, Please Choose Your Dependency,* illustration for Platform BK.

The 1980 Recommendation is a strikingly mixed bag of social support measures and market incentives. Some of the measures proposed build on the idea of art as a social good, which had led to the support of artists from the institutions of western welfare states. Others indicate a rising interest in marketisation and social impact. This is indicative of a diffuse vision on the role of art that still exists today in policy, and which is often shared among policymakers, party ideologues, lobbyists, union leaders, and to be frank, also among art workers. Not only do the problems faced by artists remain the same, but the confused mix of measures proposed in 1980 could have just as well been published today. During these decades of widespread

confusion, and to a large extent because of it, the exceptional status of artists and the major role of public institutions in the arts have come under increasing scrutiny. A perfect illustration of this development can be found in the recent history of Dutch cultural policy.

INTO THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

In the Netherlands, a serious support system for art and artists was built up in the years following the Second World War, including public institutions, grant systems, and a special welfare scheme that is now often referred to, nostalgically, as `basic income for artists'.[4] Even if this cultural tenet of the welfare state seems like an obviously good thing, not everybody loved it. In 1997, the Dutch art critic Riki Simons wrote *De gijzeling van de beeldende kunst* (The kidnapping of the visual arts), a sharp critique of publicly funded visual arts infrastructure. Even though these measures had already been deteriorating as part of the post-1989 reduction of the welfare state, according to Simons, the government was still far too meddlesome in the field at large, sustaining the public `temples of culture', supported by the work of art historians and other scholars in keeping these `temples' inaccessible to wider audiences and private initiatives. According to Simons, the combined efforts of the state and academia has monopolised the visual arts and effectively made any private initiative impossible.[5]

4 I have discussed the history and practice of these social artist support schemes in a lecture at Het Resort, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24GshzsZg6k&t=0s&ab_channel=hetresort.

5 Simons, *De gijzeling van de beeldende kunst*, 1997.

The call for tough but necessary cuts, `economic realism', and entrepreneurship was being increasingly heard even within the Dutch institutional art world. A good example is the book *Second Opinion: On Visual Art Subsidy in the Netherlands,* which was published in 2007 by Fonds BKVB, the

public funding body for art in public space. The publication includes a wide range of short contributions, in which prominent critics of the Dutch subsidy system express their views. The baseline assumption, which served as an editorial principle, was formulated in the contribution by the co-editor and director of the public arts fund Lex ter Braak: "The subsidy policy in the Netherlands [promoted] mediocre rather than good art, [...] Dutch art [lacked] real urgency and the system [maintained] an enclave that [had] placed itself outside of reality and the public."[6] Furthermore, "subsidies [seemed] to focus too much on supply (artist support) and too little on promoting demand (institutions, audience)". Ter Braak concluded that many "subsidies, despite their well-intentioned efforts, [were] ultimately counterproductive". In a review of *Second Opinion*, the cultural sociologist Pascal Gielen observed that the subsidy system had been found to be all too democratic, making quality control impossible.[7] In this climate, the very idea of a social cultural subsidy policy started to look idiotic.

6 Ter Braak, *Second Opinion*, pp. 12-19.

7 Gielen, `Second Opinion', 2007.

8 Justin O'Connor makes a sharply critical analysis of how creative industry policy co-opted the grassroots emergence of cultural industries in the UK in *Culture Is Not an Industry*, 2023.

While the appreciation of art and culture as a public goods sank, the focus of policy makers shifted to culture as a means to provide social and economic issues with a creative solution. They sought to stimulate a more lucrative sector, focused on entertainment, impact, and innovation. Diversification, participation, and cultural entrepreneurship were presented as the new principles that the stagnant cultural field needed. Funding systems and industry policy were overhauled, paving the way for a wide variety of innovative cultural practices, in which anything was possible, as long as it included enough creative entrepreneurship, digitisation, design thinking, 21st-century skills, and

social impact. Especially emerging branches of the knowledge economy, like coding and game design, were promoted. In short, the quest for a for-profit cultural sector, a Creative Industry, had begun. The shining light and example to follow was the United Kingdom, which already achieved a profitable Creative Industry in the 1990s under Blair.[8]

The focus of creative industry policy was to create a new industry by combining existing `sub-industries' like visual art, theatre, architecture, game design, and so on, in order to reach a scale that permitted industrial policy. One of the most striking areas of creative industries politics soon became the `creative city'. Looking for new ways to create large-scale impact with the creative industry, policymakers became enamoured with the enthusiastic and inspiring theories of urban theorists like Richard Florida and Charles Landry, who suggested that the development of (temporary) creative hubs could catalyse the economic development of underdeveloped neighborhoods. Artists and creatives would get the cheap space they needed to work, local inhabitants would get access to culture, and more economic activity would soon follow. However, it soon turned out that the art and culture in the `creative city' are not much more than the tools of gentrification.

Roel Griffioen has sharply described the role of artists on the `frontline' of urban redevelopment, using the case of the Amsterdam Nieuw-West neighborhood in the early 2010s.[9] `Creatives' were parachuted into the area while large quantities of social housing were being sold off, demolished, or `liberalised', and public facilities like neighborhood centers and libraries were being closed. Many inhabitants, unable to pay the rent in the newly developed properties, were forced to move away (as, of course the artists and `creatives' would, too, after they played their role in the development process). Noticing the discontent among the `natives', the newly arrived creatives decided to help by setting up... a free moving service.[10] Now, the displacement of working-class inhabitants from city centers because of rising property prices was nothing new; it had already been described by Friedrich Engels in 1873.[11] The novelty in the creative city was the top-down management and acceleration of this process. Thanks to sharp critiques of the opportunism among `creatives', like Martha Rosler's *Culture Class,* there is a larger critical awareness regarding the role of culture in gentrification and other types of `expulsion', as Saskia Sassen has called the extraction of urban capital from its inhabitants, than there was ten years ago.[12] But creative-as-economic development is still the norm in urban culture policy in metropoles around the world.

9 Griffioen, `Het vreemdelingenlegioen', 2017.
10 Idem.
11 Engels, `The Housing Question',1872.
12 Rosler, *Culture Class*, 2013; Sassen, *Expulsions*, 2014.
13 Kunst, *Artist at Work*, p. 39.

FAIR PRACTICE AS REJECTION OF CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

In debates dominated by creative industries rhetoric, the policy principle of fair practice appeared as a breath of fresh air. It was first formulated in 2014 by State of the Arts (SOTA), a group of cultural workers in Belgium. Stripping back the ideological demands for commercialisation, impact, and creativity as a lifestyle, they recentered a basic premise of workers' emancipation: fair payment for labour. Under the most intuitive of normative frameworks, the call for fair practice was coupled with better material norms and ethical values. Who in their right mind could be against fairness, and, by extension, against fair payment?

Protest sign of Art Workers Italia from 2021.

While the issue of fair practice is often understood to be purely about money, it has always been about much more. To return once more to the Modern Art Gala, Bojana Kunst writes about Abramović's demands of the performers: "Abramović exploits the very presence of the performers, their affective, direct, and live persistence/endurance, in which the endurance of bodies does not produce any public (political) effect."[13] In other words, by committing to work in Abramović's famous `performance mode', the performers agreed to give up their voice and political expression. This forced passivity of the performers is outsourced and repeated in Abramović's performances on a near-industrial scale. In this practice, Kunst recognises the consistency and "the procedures of profanation" of post-Fordist alienation. The performers are present as bodies, but they are invisible as people, so it's hard to imagine, even for themselves, why they should have workers' rights.

14 Praznik, *Art Work*, 2021, p. 10.

15 Federici, *Wages against Housework*, 1972, p. 2.

The invisibility of labour is typical of any `autonomous' cultural production. (While Abramović's performers might seem like cogs in a machine, the artist's explanation shows that they still ought to be autonomously driven and passionate.) In *Art Work: Invisible Labour and the History of Yugoslav Socialism,* Katja Praznik traced the roots of the invisibility of artistic production, and shows that "the mystification of artistic labour and its exploitation goes deeper than the differences in the political economy per se" – they are, in fact, inherent to the very idea of `art'.[14] That is to say, the romantic, liberal understanding of art and its autonomy always focuses on the artwork but never on the *work* put into the art. By separating the work of art from its material relations, whether that's by hanging it on a white wall or performing it in an impenetrable `performance mode', the artistic labour becomes invisible. Praznik calls this the `housewifisation'

of artistic labour. Like a clean house and a happy family, the work of art is supposed to be the product of love and passion rather than labour. Of course, artists and housewives are not exactly the same. The artist-labourer is hidden behind the highly esteemed artist genius, while housewives are supposed to remain invisible altogether. Still, in fighting precarity in the arts, we can draw valuable lessons from the feminist struggle. For instance, in *Wages against Housework,* Silvia Federici argues that demanding a wage is more about the political perspective than about a lump sum of money.[15] This is true for art work as much as for house work. From the start, the fair practice movement in the arts was about fighting invisible labour, taboos, stereotypes, social injustices, and the increasing pressure of commercialisation. Fair practice is, or tries to be, a political perspective.

BOTTOM-UP TRANSFORMATION

Fair practice was first conceived of by SOTA as a label, much like the fair-trade label. The label's logo would be a clover with four leaves, each representing one aspect of fairness: ameliorating solidarity (e.g., artist fees, good contracts, social security), ethical agreements (e.g., transparency on funding, freedom of speech), ecological consciousness, and diversity. Institutions and organisations would be able to separately apply for accreditation for each `leaf' of the fair practice label. Thus, the label would function as a positive tool to encourage self-regulation and, above all, public debate. SOTA explains:

> Some might consider the approach chosen for the logo `soft', but it has its advantages. It enables us to develop a discourse and gather information on what, precisely and concretely, are the problems of today, making it possible for them to be discussed openly by artists and organisations. Many of these problems

> are fortified by mystification and shame. Enabling an open and fruitful discourse will be of considerable value to many.[16]

The fair practice label never materialised, but SOTA continued to work on fair practice as a value system in never-ending development. In 2019, they published the Fair Arts Almanac, the result of a week-long summer camp with art workers.[17] The almanac format allowed for a wide range of short contributions to be included: testimonies, demands, and outcries of precarious workers, a theoretical model of the `artistic biotope', statistical data on the economic position of art workers and the gender pay-gap, strategic input from a union organiser, a report of the shared income experiment Common Wallet, an introduction to the contract research platform Caveat, a graph with average artist incomes, practical tips to have better conversations, explanations of laws, and much more. This plurality perfectly illustrates how `fair practice' bridges the gap between individual experiences of need and desire and `objective' evidence of systemic problems. The nature of precariousness is that it makes us feel alone: no one deals with exactly the same conditions, especially given the intermittent and unstable working conditions of freelancing life. Sociologists Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim observe that, as a result, we tend to "search for biographical solutions to systemic problems".[18] The holistic approach of fair practice moves away from individual survival strategies, towards collective demands, without losing touch with the reality of individual practices in the process (as, for instance, unions often do).

16 SOTA, `Towards a "Fair Practice" Logo for Organisations within the Arts', 2014.

17 SOTA, *Fair Arts Almanac 2019*, 2019.

18 Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, 2001.

19 See: https://reshape.network.

20 Baert, Schick, and Trotman, `Governance of the Possible', 2020.

The discussions around fair practice that took off in Belgium soon spread to other countries. A good example is Reshape, a collaborative, bottom-up research project that proposed instruments for transition towards an alternative, fairer, and unified arts ecosystem across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, with partner organisations from Bulgaria, Romania, Portugal, Slovenia, Germany, Belgium, Poland, Spain, Greece, France, Switzerland, Croatia, the Czech Republic, and the UK, which ran from 2018 until 2021.[19] In this project, `fairness' was associated with a `paradigm change':

> By shifting towards a paradigm truly rooted in social justice we are then able to create models that imagine fairer ways of being together and value the most vulnerable in our communities, rather than seeking to "include" them in the structures that are designed to exclude. Within this new paradigm we can work together to create new narratives, common goals, forms of cooperation instead of competition, informed by a wide range of understandings, lived experiences and perspectives.[20]

The artists, activists, and researchers involved in Reshape departed from governance theories on sociocracy and holocracy, movements like citizen initiatives and commoning, and relevant practices like Pirate Care and, once again, Common Wallet. They then developed a set of proposals and `prototypes' that primarily focused on new forms of governance, and, only secondarily, on redistribution. For example, they developed Fairy Purse, a speculative tool for fairer payment that combines collective and transparent self-assessment, flexible salary, and a shared bank account. Its goal is to enable redistribution but, more importantly, to engender a shared sense of fairness among participants. Maybe `paradigm change' is an unnecessarily pompous choice of terms for Reshape, but an example like Fairy Purse illustrates what fair practice is at the core:

a bottom-up push for systemic transformation based on anti-capitalist value systems.

FAIR PRACTICE POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

In several countries, the fair practice push has led to significant outcomes. A group of New York art workers established W.A.G.E (Working Artists in the Greater Economy) in 2008. The founding W.A.G.E. WO/MANIFESTO includes typical fair practice demands: payment for all work, rejection of payment in `cultural capital' or `exposure', and mutual respect between art workers and institutions. W.A.G.E. went on to develop one of the most ingenious art workers' fee calculators to date. Considering a minimum payment, as well as the total operating costs and top salary of the inviting institution, the calculator suggests a minimum wage, a living wage, and a maximum wage for a range of activities – exhibitions, talks, screenings, texts, performances, as well as hourly fees for miscellaneous work. In the highly deregulated context of the United States, there is no way to enforce these standards legally, so W.A.G.E. instead stimulates self-regulation. Since 2014, they accredit non-profit institutions that follow the guidelines with an official W.A.G.E. Certification (which was the inspiration for SOTA's fair practice label) and they run a WAGENCY that supports art workers in their negotiations. They claim that between 2014 and 2024, 130 institutions have been certified across the U.S. and more than $18 million has been paid out to artists through the programme's administration.

In European countries with a legacy of state-supported social security, organisers have focused more on changes in government regulation. Backed by the principle of fair practice, and in collaboration with other organisations like NICC and Jubilee, SOTA managed to achieve several policy improvements in Belgium. In 2021, the fair payment guideline Juist Is Juist for the visual arts was

launched. After that, a coalition of art workers' organisations worked with the government on a reform of the Belgian social security system, effective from January 2024, art workers can now apply for an `art workers certificate'. A commission of peers judge whether an art worker indeed qualifies as a professional art worker. Those who receive the certificate have access to several tax reductions and social benefits. If they can also prove that they get regular commissions for artistic work, certified artists can also get a special `art workers allowance' of around 1000 euros per month to supplement their income.

The policy push was also picked up in Belgium's neighboring country, the Netherlands. In 2017, a Fair Practice Code was created by the sector-wide Dutch pro-culture lobby organisation Kunsten '92. The Code was largely modelled after the value system of the Belgian fair practice label (trust, transparency, solidarity, sustainability, and diversity), but further defined these values into three principles: fair pay, fair share, and fair chain. Following the Belgian example, the Dutch code acknowledged that fair practice requires not only payment, but also a sense of collective responsibility. In 2020, compliance became part of the policy for funding requirements, as formulated by the Ministry of Culture.

An important Dutch addition to the fair practice debate was the development of a semi-binding Artist Fee Guideline. In typical Dutch `polder model' style, this guideline was developed by BKNL (Visual Arts Netherlands), an informal council of representatives from all primary members in the production chain: artists and other independent art workers, museums, for-profit and not-for-profit galleries, art fairs, art academies, and the national visual arts fund. In 2014, BKNL commissioned consultants to make a `quick scan' of the situation around artists' fees in exhibitions without a sales mission. It turned out that two out of every three institutions had no artist fee policy and did not pay exhibiting artists. Over the next years,

BKNL, supported by consultants, developed a guideline following the example of payment guidelines already in place in Denmark. On the 1st of January 2017, the Dutch Guideline for Artists' Fees was officially launched, providing a checklist for negotiations between artists and institutions, a template contract, and, most importantly, a fee calculator which has been widely appreciated for its simplicity.

The calculator provides a minimum fee based on three parameters: duration of the exhibition, type of work (new, existing, or adaptation of existing), and number of participating artists. To comply with European competition law, the height of these minimum fees is based on the national minimum wage. The numbers are based on the estimation that artists have about six exhibitions per year, with which they make about 60% of their total income – other income sources being sales and side jobs.[21] Importantly, this insistence on a yearly minimum wage accounts for the work directly connected to the exhibition as well as the invisible work necessary to sustain an independent art practice, from administration, networking, and building a website, to research and developing technical skills.

21 The exact reasoning behind the numbers in the calculator can be found in the SiRM-report `Kunstenaarshonoraria in de praktijk,' 2015.

22 Totta Research and BKNL, `Richtlijn Kunstenaarshonorarium: Onderzoeksrapport,' 2018.

23 With this so-called `experimental' scheme, the Mondriaan Fund would cover 50% of the costs artist fees. It was designed as a temporary incentive to ease the `transition' toward fair payment.

The effects of the Artist Fee Guideline have been significant. Another `quick scan' in 2018 showed that the balance had shifted: two-thirds of the art institutions questioned now had an artist fee policy.[22] To stimulate this development, the national visual arts fund set up a funding scheme to support artist fees.[23] Then, with the 2020 funding criterion to comply with the Fair Practice Code,

payment of artist fees for the first time became a real obligation. This made it nearly impossible for art institutions to get government funding without paying exhibiting artists a fee. In a 2022 evaluation, institutional and individual artist respondents were almost unanimously positive in their general assessment of the Artist Fee Guideline.[24] The institutions raised concerns around the rising costs of exhibitions, especially in regard to experimental programmes with young artists. However, they also expressed appreciation of the clarity with which fair remuneration can now be calculated and budgeted.

24 Berenschot, `Evaluatie Richtlijn en Experimenteerreglement Kunstenaarshonorarium,' 2021.

Dutch fair practice policy and the artist fee guideline are European front-runners, but similar developments are taking place in other countries. In Germany, several organisations, including The Artist and the Other, are working on fair payment guidelines. In Switzerland, this task has been taken up by WAGES FOR WAGES AGAINST, and in Austria by the Tiroler Kunstler:innenschaft and IG Bildende Kunst. The Slovenian art workers' union ZASUK has successfully introduced a fair payment guideline, and the Serbian visual artists association ULUS is also developing one. Fair payment is also one of the three main demands of the durational Slovak Culture Strike. Art Workers Italia (AWI) is looking to adopt the Dutch artist fee guideline to the Italian context. However, Italy lacks the cornerstone of a national minimum wage. Therefore, AWI has taken to lobbying in favour of European minimum wage regulations, potentially kickstarting, or at least proving the necessity of, a transnational solidarity movement.

The bottom-up character of fair practice advocacy is reflected in the diversity of organisational forms it takes in different places. SOTA in Belgium is an informal collective of art workers, which deflates in quiet times and inflates again when collective urgencies emerge. Platform BK, the main driver behind the development of the Dutch

artist fee guideline, is an art workers' association and an active think-tank with a small but stable core team sustained by membership contributions. ZASUK in Slovenia is a trade union, with members' working groups, assemblies, and negotiations with employers.

25 Baalman, `If the Fair Practice Code Is the Answer, Would You Please Repeat the Question?', 2020.

While the organisational recipe for achieving fair practice policy implementation seems to be different in every context, some common traits exist. Each of these efforts was kick-started by a small core group of people with energy, time, and a shared vision, as well as diplomatic skills and capacities to communicate with policymakers. This work is always unremunerated or badly paid, at least in the first years. While these initiatives usually work with a broader base of members or supporters, they hardly ever manage to reach a scale that makes the work financially sustainable. This commonly leads to doubts and chronic discussions: how to push for fair practice in circumstances with work that cannot itself live up to the standards of fairness? On the other hand, while these are important questions, fair practice efforts are only successful if the core organisers manage to remain visible, put in hours, and connect to commonly felt urgencies. In other words, fair practice organisers cannot afford the luxury of an economically sustainable organisational model. The economic unsustainability of organising for a better economic position of artists remains a seemingly unresolvable dilemma. However, a further common trait among successful organisers is their long-term commitment, independent of funding bodies. The ones who learn how to write open letters (and follow up on them), who consistently go picketing, who build partnerships and trust relations with governments, and so on, achieve much more than the many initiatives that live and die by bits of project funding. The capacity to put in these efforts is a question of privilege, but also priority, solidarity, and determination.

Without doubt, fair practice policy initiatives are on the rise. And while the developments described here are still in full swing, it is safe to conclude that fair practice has proven to be an effective rejection of neoliberal creative industries policies in at least three ways. First, it recentered the principle of payment for labour. Second, it helped deconstruct taboos around art and money and shift norms away from the silent acceptance of structural underpayment, overproduction, and invisible labour. And third, it promoted the basic democratic principle of talking *with* art workers instead of just *about* them in the making of policy.

Naturally, there have also been obstacles in the translation of fair practice values into principles, and principles into policy. Once turned into official policy, the formulation of fair protocols often heavily relies on the technocratic input of consultancy. In this process, it proves extremely hard to turn any principles beyond `fair pay' into regulation. Furthermore, the (initial) reliance on self-regulation makes fair practice criteria rather soft, and different authorities tend to hold different interpretations of what is and what isn't `fair'.[25] While these are all practical issues, there is a more serious shadow side to fair practice: its complex, two-faced relation with neoliberalism. While resisting one tenet of neoliberal policy, another typical neoliberal tendency emerged in its place: the rise of participation politics.

PARTICIPATION SOCIETY

`Participation' is a steadfast buzzword in creative industries policy, where it is taken to imply new publics and larger impact. In the early 2000s, it also became influential in contemporary theories on visual art. Nicolas Bourriaud published his influential book *Relational Aesthetics* in 1998, ushering in the rise to prominence of the relational and participatory art practices of Rirkrit

Tiravanija, Philippe Parreno, and Liam Gillick, among other artists. A basket of ingredients and a set of instructions to cook soup together, left by the absent artist for the guests of a gallery opening, became legible as a groundbreaking piece of art, which used the social relationships between the guests as the artistic medium.

26 Bishop, *Artificial Hells,* p. 13. Bishop argues that the rise of policies to promote participatory art "accompanies the consequences of the collapse of really existing communism, the apparent absence of a viable left alternative, the emergence of contemporary `post-political' consensus, and the near total marketization of art and education". She presents the policy of New Labour in the 1990s UK as the most prominent example. Ibid., p. 276-277.

27 The notion was first expressed in a 2013 speech by the Dutch king, written by the Prime Minister. Hurenkamp, `Participatiesamenleving', 2020.

In 2012, Claire Bishop critically reexamined and historicised this development in the instant-classic book *Artificial Hells*. She traced the politics of `participatory art' from the historical avant-gardes to the present day, elaborating its often radical and emancipatory characteristics but also describing some of the discontents around art and participation. Participatory art is often thought to be radically inclusive and accessible to working-class audiences, but, in practice, it is highly instrumentalised by neoliberal governments to serve goals that include `increasing employability, minimising crime, fostering aspiration – anything but artistic experimentation and research as values in and of themselves'.[26] In other words, the participation of spectators in artistic practices and the useful participation of the artist in society are two sides of the same coin. Illustrating this point, Bishop calls to mind a poster created by members of the May 1968 Paris students and workers' protests:

Poster from May 1968, created by Atelier Populaire at École dex Beaux-Arts in Paris.

More than half a century later, this poster is still highly accurate. "I participate, you participate, they profit" could be called the unofficial motto of neoliberal participation politics (`they', painfully, includes a small lucky segment of the artist population). As the government retreats, responsible citizens in the participation society step in to take over its tasks: children take care of their elderly parents, grandparents take care of their grandchildren's daycare, clubs and associations take responsibility for accessible leisure activities, and so on. The liberal former Dutch prime minister (now NATO Secretary General), Mark Rutte, has described his ideal society as a `participation society'.[27] Latent in the

neoliberal ideal of the participation society is a deep reactionary wish, shared by many on the left for different reasons, to return to nineteenth-century mutualism.

As critical awareness towards the role of the `participating artist' in neoliberal policy started to grow in the 2000s and 2010s, artists started challenging participation politics, often using the artistic strategy of overidentification. With *A Modest Proposal* (2018), the artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans participated in the systems of speculative capital. Their idea, discussed at length in the chapter Transvaluation Tactics, is to turn public art collections into a speculative asset and distribute the profits among living artists. The work intelligently invokes important questions. Can artists play the financial speculation game and win? And should they, considering that taxation, redistribution, and social safety ought to be public responsibilities? A more provocative overidentification is Renzo Martens's neocolonial enterprise, initiating a gentrification project at a former Unilever plantation in Congo, together with his `participants' of the cooperative Cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise (CATPC). Proponents argue that this practice confronts uncomfortable realities, raises interesting questions, and has material emancipatory results. Critics find that Martens' overidentification is indistinguishable from complicit reproduction, and therefore loses its critical potential. I find myself thrown back and forth between these opinions (usually an indication of good art).

In yet other cases, participation and overidentification lead to obvious losses of criticality. Rotterdam artist Joep van Lieshout, known for his large art installations in public space, noticed how urban development policy instrumentalises artists to gentrify `rough' neighborhoods in his city. Van Lieshout decided to become the developer of a project called Brutus and claim the financial benefits of the gentrification effect of his own art for himself:

> Instead of being pushed out by developers, I'll be the developer myself. I bought some old buildings on 11,000 square metre of land in Rotterdam Harbour and I will build a cultural cluster with debates, exhibitions, films, music, performances, the kind of communal space you used to have in a village, as well as artists' studios and science labs. The commercial proceeds of the property will go into supporting the not-for-profit cultural centre. I still have my old squat, by the way, although it's now been legalised and I pay rent. I might move into one of my new properties, I don't know; that certainly wasn't the point of doing it all [laughter].[28]

Invoking the communalist spirit of the squatters' movement, Van Lieshout participated in and even accelerated the privatisation of housing and the commercialisation of public space. As a result of his entrepreneurial approach, gentrification continued as before, but a few artists got cheap housing, and an already-rich artist got a little richer. In the process, any artistic pretence of cultural quality was shed. As two local architecture critics observed that the architectural design of *Brutus* is exactly the kind of uninspired stacking of chunky boxes one would expect of a commercial real estate developer.[29]

It is hard to say exactly when strategic participation turns from a critique of the `participation society' into collaboration and complicity. Often, when it becomes clear, it is already too late – a phenomenon described by Markus Miessen as "the nightmare of participation".[30] This difficult balancing act between identification and critique is no different for art workers entering into collaboration with the government to create fair practice policy.

29 Peeters and Lansu, `Joep van Lieshout en de afgrond die vastgoedontwikkeling heet', 2019.

30 Miessen, *The Nightmare of Participation*, 2011.

In the participation society, governments and policymakers are happy to give workers' representatives a seat at the policy table. In the case of freelance art workers, this mostly means spending hours upon hours of un(der)paid time in meetings with well-paid bureaucrats. The fact that one's voice is heard can lead to significant changes in policy, as the case of fair practice policy shows. But in return, one is expected to justify and smoothen the implementation of new policies of the receding government. To those involved, this will probably feel reasonable and logical – they have, after all, co-created this policy. Also, once one has arrived in a position of collaboration and mastered the art of pragmatic negotiations, it feels foolish to give it up. Ostensibly, the good relationships with policy makers and bureaucrats lead to bits of money here and there, creating a real beneficial impact on the real lives of real art workers.

31 In *Artist at Work,* Bojana Kunst discusses how the moral register is dominating (formerly) political discussions in the arts. Kunst mainly draws on Chantal Mouffe's theories of the agonism-antagonism binary and post-political politics of the self.

Once representatives of all positions in the production chain are locked in as participants in the creation of policy, the dynamic of the conversations changes remarkably. People get to know and often like each other. A sense grows that `we're all in it together' and the conversation moves from an antagonistic into a moral register. If every problem is a collective problem, the solution must be a moral principle that will inform improved management.[31] In the end, class struggle between workers and employers is replaced by the moral standards of, for instance, diversity and inclusion, evidenced and managed using the metrics of a visitor population rather than change in ownership or governance.

In the moral register, fair practice, too, appears as a `post-political' issue. At this point, the strength of the

self-evident `rightness' of fair practice turns into a weakness. This was also noticed by SOTA. In 2024, ten years after first introducing the idea of `fair practice', they wrote:

> `Fair' was a handy term – for quite a while. [...] We assume it is associated with justice, equality, changes for everyone, good practice, respect and tolerance, non-violent behavior, etc. [...] We thought we could describe what we meant more explicitly by starting from the term `fair' and diving into related aspects. But once we got more into the details, [...] we learned how it swelled up to an imprecise buzzword for whatever people think is kind of an okay practice.[32]

The post-political fuzziness of fair practice obscures material conflict or, at best, reduces it to a management question. For instance, a 2015 review of the budgets of Dutch art institutions showed that large art institutions, including most museums, would need only 2% extra yearly budget to start paying artist fees while small institutions would require 20% extra budget to pay fairly and keep the quantity of production.[33] Yet, the Dutch museum association has structurally blocked efforts to reflect these disparities in the artist fee guideline, while the less business savvy and more solidary cohort of small not-for-profit art galleries has enthusiastically embraced fair payment for artists. As a result, artists get paid more, but fair practice standards also reproduce the existing inequality and the dominant norm of self-exploitation in small not-for-profit art galleries.

32 Matthys, Maxelon, Galeazzi, and Gruber, *Kin Arts Almanac*, 2023, p. 11.

33 SiRM, `Kunstenaarshonoraria in de praktijk', 2015.

In the Netherlands, this disparity is even directly accelerated by the government. In 2020, the Minister of Culture made compliance with the Fair Practice Code into a

`knock-out criterion' to get public funding – but she did not increase the structural budgets.[34] For the activists who had been fighting for years for the right to fair labour relations and payments, this was a victory with a bitter aftertaste. Immediately, small institutions had to choose between paying artists adequately at the expense of the (already strained) payment of their own workers, or cutting back on their programming and thereby jeopardising their reach and public legitimacy. However disappointed, art workers' representatives, including myself, accepted this reality as a necessary evil. Even without extra public funding, fair pay requirements countered the norm of underpaid overproduction and helped bring to light exactly how big the gap between production and remuneration had been all along.

34 Van Winden, `Fair Practice According to the Government and the Client', 2019.

I'm no longer sure that this is how it works. The protocols of fair practice, like the artist fee guideline, might still be `just' and serve as helpful tools for artists to negotiate with institutions for better payment. But, as we observed before, the political perspective of fair practice is always about more than a `lump sum of money'. And it is exactly this potential paradigm shift away from the normalisation of exploitation that is at risk of becoming lost. In the years following 2020, funds were moved around by funding bodies to make fair pay possible. This mainly involved cutting back on low-threshold project funding schemes and providing a lower number of institutions with a higher amount of funding. Instead of making invisible labour visible and emancipating workers, fair practice policy defines and justifies a new division between visibility and invisibility. This is a division between those deemed `professional' enough to receive fair payment and a larger group of aspiring but insufficiently competent professionals. Labour that does not meet the standards of professionalism is effectively more like a hobby, and hobbyist efforts, in economic terms, should remain

invisible. As a result, even minimum wage level payments for art workers become the exclusive privilege of peak professional achievers. The majority of art workers remain unpaid – but now, at least, they are fairly unpaid.

To me, the enforcement of fair pay guidelines without providing the necessary public means by the Dutch Minister of Culture seemed unfair, but also illogical at first. Only after a while, I understood that it was the logical result of a liberal misunderstanding. Fair practice was defined in Belgium in analogy to fair trade in Belgium, and, in the Netherlands, its implementation was part of a labour market reform agenda. Struggle against exploitation was framed in the more neutral-sounding terminology of `fairness'. Conflicts of interest between workers and employers were subordinated to `shared values'. Strict demands and general labour agreements were temporarily suspended, in favour of self-regulation. These were strategic decisions that opened doors to participation. But the concept of Fair Practice that grew in the heads of policy makers was the impression that fair practice is essentially a market equilibrium. The explicit goal of fair practice policy, in the liberal understanding, is to foster professionalisation to the point where the policy could sustain itself in the market without relying too heavily on public investment.[35] To their minds, Fair Practice policy is a market repair operation.

35 This is, for instance, clear in the report `Naar een wenbare en weerbare culturele sector'. See: https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/11/16/presentatie-wendbaar-en-weerbaar.

The idea behind Fair Practice as a market repair mechanism is two-fold. First, neoliberal policy-makers believe that consumers are willing to pay more for a `fair product', which would cover part of the extra costs of fair pay. Second, the idea is that art workers who can't be paid go and look for another job. In a 2022 meeting behind closed doors, the director of the semi-public body

stated that cultural institutions and policymakers should support a "dignified dying process" for the superfluous labour force. It is abundantly clear that this trust in the market is misguided – from practice, all reports and evaluations of Dutch fair practice policy, and macro-economic research.[36] Sustainable art circulation and market-driven policy are not, and have never been, compatible. But however misinformed, this understanding of Fair Practice suits the government. It can set payment norms and preach `fairness', without taking any responsibility for the material consequences. Thus, from a grass-roots push for heterodox economic transformation, Fair Practice grew into a game of divide and rule – defined by the government, executed by the market.

In the Netherlands, five years after the adoption of the Fair Practice Code as an official funding requirement, we see a steady decline in support, especially after the inauguration of a new far-right government in 2024. Both institutions and art workers perceive fair practice as unaffordable, and at odds with other institutional goals such as affordable tickets, higher-risk investments in emerging artists, and the freedom to oppose growth and professionalisation, to produce non-commercial programs, and even to work voluntarily in institutional contexts. There are no numbers to show the effects of fair pay standards on the number of independent artists, curators, artwriters, museum guides, teachers, and art handlers. However, there are historical reasons to believe that instead of leaving the field, people will go back to what they're used to: the shadow economy, where precarious workers accept low-paid or unpaid jobs in exchange for visibility and networking opportunities. They will remember Fair Practice as just another empty promise.

36 O'Connor, *Culture Is Not an Industry*, 2023.

37 O'Connor, *Reset*, 2023.

FAIR PRACTICE IN THE FOUNDATIONAL ECONOMY

The notion of `fair practice' was intended to be soft, focused on values, and self-regulated. These were conscious strategic decisions that proved to be effective as an informal denominator of common sense values, which effectively shifted payment norms and made previously invisible labour visible. But although the vague definition of `fairness', lacking a baseline understanding of the economic logic that should uphold fair practice, might have initially boosted its adoption across the political spectrum, it now fails to challenge liberal trust in market principles and self-regulation. Instead, contradictory interpretations of fair practice co-exist as a market repair operation, a painful transition tool, and a first step in the creation of a heterodox economic system of cultural production. The present-day, growing discontent about `fair practice' as such shows not only that the liberal assumptions about a new market equilibrium were proven false, but also a popular loss of faith in the ill-defined notion of `fairness' as a driver of fundamental change. If this faith can be won back, a good place to start is the harmonisation of fair practice with other heterodox economic cultural policy frameworks, and organising in broader coalitions.

Whenever I raise this concern with fellow organisers, they often tell me that I'm too `philosophical,' or not sufficiently pragmatic, as if a thorough heterodox economic grounding would make any conception of fair practice practically unfeasible. This is, however, not the case. Several heterodox economics-informed policy frameworks have already been developed. The one I find most inspiring is the Foundational Economy. In 2022, Justin O'Connor published the book *Reset: A New Beginning for Art and Culture.*[37] O'Connor observes, as we also did at the beginning of this Chapter, that culture has been caught between being seen as a thriving consumer industry and as a soft, somewhat crazy area of government policy in the past forty years. He states:

"As long as culture as an object of public policy remains a limping, dysfunctional, underperforming industry, its ability to contribute to the future will be hampered." In *Reset,* O'Connor tries to liberate art and culture from this impasse by describing how culture (mostly) belongs to the foundational economy and should be governed accordingly.

The idea of the foundational economy was coined by the Foundational Economy Collective (FEC) in the UK. Their work is part of a trend of `heterodox' economic thought systems that challenge the dominant economic norm of permanent growth, the rule of Gross Domestic Product, and homogenising standards like the Big Mac Index. Heterodox economic ideas are found, sometimes implicitly, in commoning practices, decolonial and autonomist critiques, and the notion of `sustainment' as the new enlightenment, but also in much more mainstream theories like Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the 21st Century*, Kate Raworth's *Donut Economy*, and even the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Within this movement, the FEC conducts macroeconomic analyses of economies all around the world. After studying the numbers, they formulated a model that distinguishes between four zones within any given economy: the core economy of family and community, the foundational economy of material and providential essentials, the overlooked economy (e.g. haircuts, sofa production, holidays), and the tradeable economy. Each of these zones is fundamental to a thriving society, and each one operates by different principles, ways of working, and objectives. Out of the four zones, only the tradeable economy can simply be left to be governed by (regulated) market competition. The FEC's research shows that the tradable economy covers about 30 to 40% of the total economy in most countries. Imposing free market logic on the remaining 60 to 70% per cent – which they call the foundational economy – is not only illogical, but it will also simply not work.

To remedy the `unfair' labour conditions in art and culture, we must assert the position of culture within the

foundational economy. O'Connor remarks that it became especially clear during the Covid pandemic that a societal foundation required for `sustainable prosperity' is in fact much broader than most traditional, reductive economic theories would stipulate. We need food, shelter, hygiene, social interaction, transport, education, and affection, as well as culture. Some parts of the cultural sector, such as blockbuster movies and art auctions, could be left to the market. But most art and culture, from art museums to amateur theatre companies, belong to a domain of the `communal luxury' that contributes to the reinvention of solidarity, citizenship, and the good life, and is crucial for social reproduction. O'Connor's analysis of the role of art seems to be inspired by the German Romantic ideal of Bildung. Echoing Schiller, he describes culture as a `collective ritual', which fulfils a foundational role of free thinking, imagination, and play, exactly because of its lack of instrumental use value. Like Schiller, O'Connor argues in favour of aesthetic education for everyone. Through this flirt with romantic paternalism, O'Connor conjures an important question: can an emancipatory humanist understanding of culture inform a breakaway from the dominance of the market?

Reset convincingly defends the premise that it makes economic, social, and governmental sense to treat culture as a social fundament. This implies a radical break with market repair work strategies to improve art workers' conditions. A revaluation of culture, a new `social licence' as O'Connor calls it, can only be brought about as part of a broad reform agenda to establish a basic public infrastructure that includes universal basic income, thorough public education, and distribution of resources through citizens' councils. With this conclusion, *Reset* avoids any form of art exceptionalism and proposes to tackle problems such as exclusion, lack of representation, and erosion of democratic control in cultural institutions at the root. In short, a new beginning for arts and culture does not start with culture. It starts with a new social foundation.

BETWEEN FAIRNESS AND KINSHIP

Embedding fair practice campaigns in the discourse of the foundational economy can be transformative. At stake is fair practice for all, beyond the gig and outside the market. The point would not be to make the position of the art worker in the market tenable and manageable, but to make labour radically visible and demand emancipation. If this attempt were to be undertaken, I think its success would be dependent on the assertion of `horizontal allyship', as Rune Peitersen has called it, that extends beyond the ivory tower of culture. The central question of fair practice then becomes: How can we, as artists and cultural workers, use our skills and privilege to reformulate our own socio-economic position and, by doing so, also help other precarious workers? How can we cultivate a notion of care that means more than just taking care of our own?[38]

38 Peitersen, `Horizontal Allies,' 2022.

39 SOTA, *Kin Arts Almanac*, 2023.

40 Matthys and Galleazi discuss the relation between art and mutualism in `Artels', 2023.

As the authoritarian right gains power, these conversations might start feeling more and more like pleading for governments to do work that they do not want to do. It is therefore important to remember that one can always escape from the nightmare of participation. A categorical `no' to the policy debate is a valid strategic option, which leaves many other ways of practicing politics. In 2024, SOTA published its second almanac. Instead of `fair', the editors called it *Kin Arts Almanac*.[39] They follow a definition of kinship from the Center for Humans and Nature: belonging to a world of relations. These relations are complex and often contradictory; they pertain to communication, empathy, and social rules, as well as the distribution of resources. This is, perhaps, the most interesting way to tap into the hype of posthumanist ecosystems-thinking in the arts. It doesn't devolve into depoliticised thought experiments (what does the

mushroom want?), nor into idyllic perceptions of nature. The `ecosystem' of art is a merciless food chain full of predators. Who would ask a predator to self-regulate? Yet, as we know from Kropotkin's studies of nature, the mutual aid drive among peers is strong and provides a solid ground to build on.[40] The politicised bottom-up work of self-organisation and prefiguration is as important as it ever was. In the foundational economy, it can also find a clear strategic goal.

HOW DO ART WORKERS MAKE EXPERIMENTAL VALUES, CURRENCIES, AND ECONOMIES HERE AND NOW?

WHAT LESSONS CAN WE LEARN FROM THEM?

WITH KOEN BARTIJN

TRANSVALUATION TACTICS: HOW ART WORKERS MAKE MONEY (LITERALLY)

"Value is too valuable to be left to capital."
Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*

"The economy can become
a design question for us all."

"Our dreams are the indeterminacy
we owe to each other."
Lene Vollhardt, *Swirls of Fortune*

Epicurus said that death does not concern us, because as long as we exist, death is not here. And once it does come, we no longer exist. The historically dominant way of thinking about art and money is very similar: art and economy are two separate, mutually exclusive realms. Real artists shouldn't care about money, and real money corrupts the arts. Neither can live while the other survives.

And yet, there is something enchanting about the way art creates monetary value out of thin air. Whether we like it or not, most of us remember the sale of Marizio Cattelan's *Comedian* by Sotheby's in 2024. A 25-cent banana from a sidewalk vendor in New York could, apparently, transform into a 6.2 million asset by duct-taping it to the wall of an auction house across the street. (You might object that the artwork is the `concept behind the banana' instead of the actual banana. But doesn't that only increase the mystery?) People find Cattelan's magic trick scandalous and endlessly fascinating. They scold it, hate-eat it, mimic it, but, ultimately, buy it, with millions of dollars and clicks along the way.[1] What is this deep, contradictory connection between art and money? What is the banana's magic?

1 Guardian News, `"Hungry" Performance Artist Eats $120,000 Banana Art Installation', 2019.

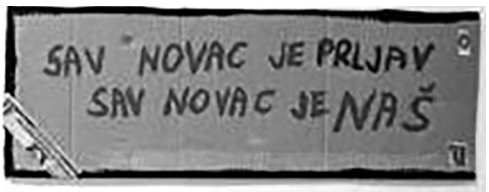
Tell me you live in late stage capitalism without telling me you live in late stage capitalism
The Sidewalk Fruit Vendor Who Sold a $6.2 Million Banana for 25 Cents
A 74-year-old immigrant who works outside Sotheby's shares a basement in the Bronx and work...
www.nytimes.com

Meme from @freeze_magazine

2 The Marxist cohort among the historical avant-gardes worked hard to break the social taboo on art workers' conditions and the artistic taboo on economic topics (think of Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*), but, to our knowledge, the art market itself was never the medium of their artistic experiments. Probably, readymades and their questioning of value came closest.

The easy answer is: financialised capital will create speculative value wherever it can, and art institutions happily collaborate. Which is true. But it is equally true that Cattelan cashed in on a long and rich tradition of artistic value experiments. In the 1960s and 70s, the emergence of conceptual art transformed previously invisible topics and structures into the medium of artistic work.[2] While notions of `art', `materiality', and `authenticity', and the institutional structures of museums and galleries became objects of artistic scrutiny, the art market, too, was embraced as a conceptually interesting domain. Many artists rejected the historic taboo of money and instead cultivated an attitude of provocative opportunism. In the early 2000s, the Croatian artist Mladen Stilinović made a series of works with text in red paint and cut-up paper

money on cardboard, appropriating cash as an artistic medium in the most direct, material way. One of the works states: "All money is dirty, all money is ours."[3] If poor is no longer sexy, opportunism might just as well be. Now, all Cattelan had to do to blow a million minds was exaggerate this tactic into spectacular proportions.



Mladen Stilinović, *Sav novac je prljav, sav novac je naš / All Money Is Dirty, All Money Is Ours*, 2006.

Today's most interesting experiments with art and money often happen in the ambiguous realm of praxis. Between the poles of absolute rejection and absolute opportunism, art workers have discovered and created a wide range of transvaluation tactics. They create currencies, set up exchange and redistribution systems, speculate, appropriate the mysterious ways of capital, and find a million ways to turn one value into another. These tactics always depart from the understanding of value as multiple: currencies represent different values in different contexts – or even different and contradictory values at any single given moment. For instance, European public funds are implicated in the history of colonialism, and, at the same time, represent a democratic mandate. Trailblazing initiatives like MoneyLab, the Economic Space Agency, and The Sphere have embraced this ambivalence as a gateway to the economy as a design question, and as an opportunity to practice `accounting otherwise'.[4] With down-to-earth practicality, they pose a set of extremely important questions. What is the value of money? How is it distributed? Why and how do we trust money? And who is allowed to govern it? Moreover, with their pragmatic approach, these art workers explore the possibilities and the limits of making money, literally.

A MEAL AND A BUCKET OF MONEY

No artistic production can exist without an administrative workload. Emailing, budgeting, fundraising, project planning, bookkeeping, and accounting are ubiquitous. Yet, spectators rarely get to see this administrative backbone, because it is thought to pollute or distract from the `true' experience of art and culture. What happens if the order between backend and frontend is reversed? Can administration be the centrepiece of cultural production? In 2019, Kate Rich, Chiz Williams, and others decided to test this and see what happened. At Cube Cinema in Bristol, they organised the first-ever festival of administration, titled RADMIN (short for `radical administration'). The announcement promised a "summit in which we will reconsider the `dull' spaces of administration, managing, trading and maintenance, not as a set of largely hostile impediments which invade or co-opt arts practice but as sites for critical and creative enquiry, radical histories, experiments, politics, wild imaginaries and meaningful work."[5]

3 Stilinović's work and attitude, specifically, should be read in the context of the so-called post-Socialist transition in former Yugoslavia, during which nationalist governance of state-funded cultural institutions coincided with the influx of large amounts of philanthropic money and `development support' from the west aiming to stimulate the development of an `open society'.

4 Bordeleau interviewed by Gloerich, `Dreaming Is, After All, Another Form of Planning', 2025.

5 Piccini and Rich, eds. *Radmin Reader 2020*, 2020, p. 11.

To kick off three days of administrative adventures, there was a Gala Dinner called *The shares; A meal.* It was designed and hosted by Viriconium Palace, an artist duo interested in building a practice that resists professionalisation and instead tests forms of small-scale cultural production and financial models. One of their activities was organising dinner parties, mostly at home, where up to

twelve guests would be hosted for a meal and a cultural programme. The set-up always included an empty bucket on the floor of the toilet to collect anonymous, voluntary donations toward the ingredients and fees. The donations always matched the costs more or less.

Turning this model into a catering service for the RADMIN Festival's opening night, several changes were introduced. First, the format had to be scaled up from a maximum of twelve guests to accommodate approximately ninety attendees. Second, the organisers wanted to arrange for a guaranteed income of 780, secured through advance ticket sales, to cover the costs of feeding a larger crowd. This pre-raised budget led to a new idea: the hosts would place a donation bucket on the floor of the toilet as per usual, but this time it would be filled with ticket sales money in cash, inviting guests to either anonymously donate additional funds or take money from it. Viriconium Palace originally intended to provide clear instructions, but on the night of the event, the bucket of money ended up on the toilet floor without any instructions. The outcomes were surprising. The 780 of cash at the start of the night had, at the end, turned into... 60.00.

In a publication about the RADMIN festival, Viriconium Palace later reflected on the unexpected turn of events:

> We heard of many reactions to the money
> and its bucket, that people wanted to protect it,
> count it, damage it, collectively discuss it,
> move it away from the bathroom, throw it on the floor,
> wear it. We understand that people
> encountered it in small groups and privately
> and that some did not make it past
> the threshold of the doorway.
> We know that some people put money in,
> definitely that people took some out,
> it got burnt and it flew through the air
> in the dinwing hall. We understand people were
> enticed by it, felt guilty about it, angry,
> disappointed and attacked, that it created a lot
> of space for conversation but that it held
> an unpleasant, uneasy existence for many.
> Despite the delivery of the money diverging
> from our original intentions, there was,
> interestingly, in the outcome a lot of crossovers
> in terms of our wider interests.
> The money appeared to us to become a shapeshifter.
> In the absence of a framework for assessment
> or any kind of anchor, it somehow quite
> successfully held multiple and asymmetrical
> values simultaneously.[6]

6 Ibid., p. 15.

At first glance, the disappearance of money from the bucket might seem like an administrative error or a classical tragedy of the commons. But the set-up was effective as an aesthetic intervention. The small addition of a money bucket rendered the financial backend of the meal not only visible but participatory, and thereby totally thwarted the expectations of guests. The inconspicuous bucket turned into a container of contested values. While some considered it a way to collect a fair remuneration of

contributors and organisers, others saw it as a quick way to cover next month's rent, or a common pool of resources to be collectively administered and distributed among the guests. One thing is clear, though. A small and simple intervention managed to derail what would have otherwise been another pleasant but unremarkable art world dinner, leaving us with some questions to foster. How can artists, collectives, and institutions assess the bucket of money made accessible to them by public funds, private donors, and sales? What values do we assign to it? In what ways might such money be redistributed, reimagined, re-inscribed?

Transvaluation starts here and now, if we want it.

SEVERED SPOTS

In 2020, the creative industry collective MSCHF bought a hand-signed print by Damien Hirst, consisting of 88 coloured dots, for 30,000 dollars. They cut up the print into 88 pieces and sold each individual dot for 480 dollars. Furthermore, they auctioned the leftover sheet of paper, titled *88 Holes,* for 261,400 dollars, bringing the total profit to 273,640 dollars. The art market is full of these kinds of contemporary Robin Hood figures, stealing from the superrich to give to the rich, which is to say, to themselves. Isn't it... titillating?

A MODEST PROPOSAL

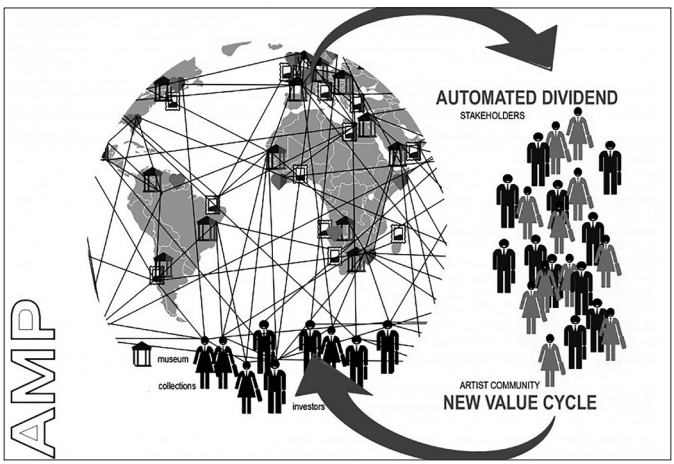
In March 1970, the Art Workers' Coalition in New York wrote a list of 12 demands to improve the social and economic positions of artists.[7] A document that we warmly recommended to look up, as it's shocking how urgent nearly all of the demands still are, more than half a century later. Of particular interest is the last point on the list: "Until such time as a minimum income is guaranteed for all people, a trust fund should be set up from a tax levied on the

sales of the work of dead artists. This fund would provide stipends, health insurance, help for artists' dependents and other social benefits." It's an extremely elegant idea. For various reasons, the market value of artworks typically increases when artists get older and, especially, when they die. The idea that living artists, rather than estates, benefit from these value increases makes a lot of sense, and it could potentially lead to a revolving system in which every successful older artist started out as a not-yet-successful but sponsored beginning artist. Unfortunately, though, the demand was never fulfilled.

7 The demands were first published a few months later in a text by Lucy Lippard, `Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History', 1970.

Now, even if the demands of the Art Workers' Coalition are still up-to-date, the art market has significantly changed in the past 50 years; it has become financialised. The art market has always been abstract, in the sense that high-end art is traded as a speculative asset, deriving market value based solely on the speculation of a future increase of said value. (Usually, this speculation doesn't require the artwork to be cut up and resold for parts. The institutional structure of galleries, museums, magazines, and so on instead inspires the trust required for speculative value increase.) However, in becoming financialised, the art market has developed an additional layer of abstraction. Speculation on the future increase in value has itself become the basis for the creation of financial products, which are in turn traded. The most concrete example is fractional art trading, a service offered by investment companies that buy artworks and sell `shares' of these works to smaller, usually private investors. On a fractional art investment platform, one can, for instance, buy and sell 1% of an Andy Warhol silkscreen print. The artwork in question is typically held in a climate-controlled safe in a freeport, shielded from taxation and other mundane inconveniences. If anything, changing ownership means moving from one safe to another, which potentially involves

a short flight in a climate-controlled airplane, but definitely no exhibitions or other public frivolities. Duty Free Art, as Hito Steyerl called this asset class, reaches a level of dematerialisation that the conceptualist neo-avant-gardes could not have dreamed of: it is no longer meant to be experienced at all.[8] Art, like real estate and financial capital itself, is a totally arbitrary basis for a totally abstract speculative game. Bubbles on top of bubbles on top of bubbles.



Vermeir & Heiremans, illustration of A Modest Proposal.

Interestingly, the Brussels-based artist duo Vermeir & Heiremans decided to create an equivalent of the Art Workers' Coalition's trust fund proposal in the 21st century, adapting it to the reality of the contemporary financialised art market. In 2018, they initiated the ongoing artistic project *A Modest Proposal*, which investigates whether speculation and financialisation can be hijacked to create more equality. Their so-called modest proposal is this: public art institutions agree to create a financial product based on their art collections, real estate, and symbolic capital. Profits generated by trading the financial product are distributed using an `automated dividend'

that creates a cycle of wealth benefiting investors and institutions, as well as the creators of these values, the original stakeholders – the artists and art workers. Without going into detail, it suffices to say that the proposal is concrete, describing the technical, financial, and legal technicalities (developed in collaboration with a lawyer) to create the financial product.[9] Again, the proposal was never executed, even if it could and still can. But the questions *A Modest Proposal* raises are important. If art is financialised anyway, can it be financialised for the common good? Should it? And what does it mean if our public institutions are unwilling to engage in these schemes?[10]

8 Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, 2016.

9 A film by Vermeir & Heiremans explaining A Modest Proposal in more detail can be found on the website of Jubilee: https://www.jubilee-art.org/projects/a-modest-proposal-in-a-black-box-2. We highly recommend watching it!

10 More on this in Vermeir & Heiremans in conversation with Eckenhaussen, `Art in Permacrisis #8', 2025.

ARTS OF THE WORKING CLASS

In 2018, the street journal Arts of the Working Class (AWC) started to appear on the streets of Berlin. It is a street journal similar to those found in most European cities, distributed to marginalised, mostly unhoused individuals who sell them and retain 100% of the proceeds. What distinguishes Arts of the Working Class is its content: contributions from artists and thinkers across different fields and in different languages, with articles from a scale of known and established writers, to emerging, underrepresented and underfunded writers, packaged in beautiful graphic design, and providing vendors with a product imbued with cultural cachet. AWC gives art writers the perfect excuse to do what they love most, producing low-paid, high-level content for an internationally recognised periodical. Berlin cool kids get to buy a paper not only because they want to

support the cause but also because they're genuinely interested in the content. The journal is also popular among vendors, whose accumulated sales add up to a print run of 50.000 to 75.000 copies per bimonthly issue.

Arts of the Working Class was able to pay its contributors a modest fee using municipal cultural funding, until a few years ago when the organisation was blacklisted for publishing an article that described Israel as an Apartheid state. The journal has since continued resisting the rampant political censorship in Germany and kept up the production, but its conditions are increasingly precarious. This raises interesting questions around the transvaluation of art work as a tool of class struggle. Arts of the Working Class transforms cultural capital into a substantial income source for some of the most marginalised groups in German society. Yet, to perform this alchemy, AWC is increasingly dependent on the self-exploitation of cultural workers. How should we view artists' self-exploitation when it supports the economic emancipation of marginalised groups? The model feels like a good way to mobilise art against capital, but how to determine whether this is indeed the case? Is it desirable – and could similar models emerge in other artistic or economic contexts?

CULTURESTAKE

Money rules the world. And although culture is ideally regarded as a common good – a material and immaterial collection of our shared history, our common heritage, a shared space for critical reflection, a democratic arena for imagination, and a place for socialisation and new cultural production, big money increasingly dominates its supply and demand. To counter elitism in the arts and culture programming of museums, arts festivals, and theatres, or city planners, the London-based cultural organisation Furtherfield began exploring new forms of radical, democratic, cultural decision-making through an innovative dig-

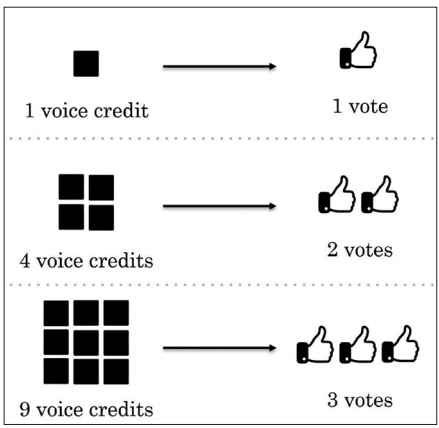
ital tool and participatory platform called CultureStake.

Rather than a cultural economy dictated by the deepest pockets, Furtherfield aimed to build an economy of emotions around cultural venues, activities, and public artworks that people want to be part of. The tool is an app that lets communities and artists make cultural decisions together and vote on the kinds of cultural events and artworks they want to see realised. After piloting the app at the Leeds International Festival of Arts and Science in 2020, Furtherfield began using it for their People's Park Plinth initiative in Finsbury Park, London, starting in 2021. The project empowered nature dwellers and local inhabitants to shape the park's cultural programming by voting on newly made digital artworks. During a voting weekend, attendees could vote out of several artworks to be developed further. In 2023, CultureStake was used to involve local residents in voting rounds on cultural activities designed to benefit the many species that inhabit Finsbury Park – including plants, bees, geese, and more. This would culminate in the Treaty of Finsbury Park, an interspecies cooperation agreement to guarantee bountiful biodiversity.[11]

11 Catlow and Diehm, `The Treaty of Finsbury Park 2025', 2020.

The name CultureStake refers to the personal `stake' each member of the public holds in a co-curated or collectively governed public programme. Or, to put it another way: the stakes that participants place on the table, via the app, to express and realise their ideas and preferences for community artistic programmes. This takes place through quadratic voting on the blockchain, in which stakes are represented by tokens. Each user is given 100 tokens to distribute across a selection of proposed art productions, all opting for a place in the festival. But voting is not linear: the cost of allocating multiple votes to a single project increases quadratically. That is, 1 vote costs 1 token, 2 votes cost 4, 3 votes cost 9, 4 votes cost 16, and so on. So, if someone decides to place the maximum number of 9 votes

on a single project, that would cost 81 tokens, leaving them with just 19. And since no one wants to squander their tokens – even if it's not real money – people tend to distribute their remaining tokens more carefully. Maybe they place 4 votes (16 tokens) on another project, and with the 3 they have left, they might place 1 vote each on three others. In this way, every vote becomes a small act of strategic commitment, a cultural stake: balancing personal preference with collective impact; thinking of the larger picture and the multiple values a cultural programme can produce.



An illustration of quadratic voting: 1 credit = 1 vote, 4 credits = 2 votes, 9 credits = 3 votes, and so on.

At the time of writing this text, June 2025, Furtherfield is "in the next phase of development and actively looking for partners from different types of venues and communities to partner", according to its website. This invitation gestures toward a broader applicability of the CultureStake model – well beyond the context of a single local arts programme. By breaking with the linear logic of traditional budgeting or top-down decision-making and embracing quadratic voting or spending, new forms of democratic participation become possible. The Treaty of Finsbury Park project shows the promise of new modes of governance and the distribution of collective resources among

multiple stakeholders – including non-human species – to shape the environments and cultures they inhabit in greater harmony with one another.[12] It could also be of great interest to a wide variety of crowdfunding platforms and initiatives, where communities can allocate funds to projects and initiatives they value. So, how might this approach to participatory decision-making be applied across different contexts where resources are distributed? Could it even be adapted to national public cultural sectors, where public and private funding bodies are reshaped as mechanisms that respond to communities' quadratic votes and contributions? And if so, how would this reshape the cultural field?

12 Idem.

13 Coppola, `Working (together) #4', 2019, p.106.

14 Idem.

COMMON WALLET

In January 2018, ten cultural workers from Brussels decided to try out a polyamorous relationship with money.[13] They put their individual bank accounts aside and pooled 100% of their income into a shared bank account, which they called the Common Wallet. Each member had a bank card to take out money for rent, mortgage, food, clothing, energy, transport, or any other need. They had no rules; just shared values, a sense of collective responsibility, and many meetings to stay in touch. "Everyone was surprised", participant Luigi Coppola wrote after a year, "by the ease with which the first implementation of the Common Wallet was realised."[14] Redistribution does not have to be hard, grand, or distant. Varying income levels, family sizes, and other material differences can be negotiated on the community level without any serious friction. But when do the differences become too big? If a member receives a major inheritance? Or if someone becomes ill and can no longer work at all? And what does it mean that small solidarity systems can work? Is it a good thing to

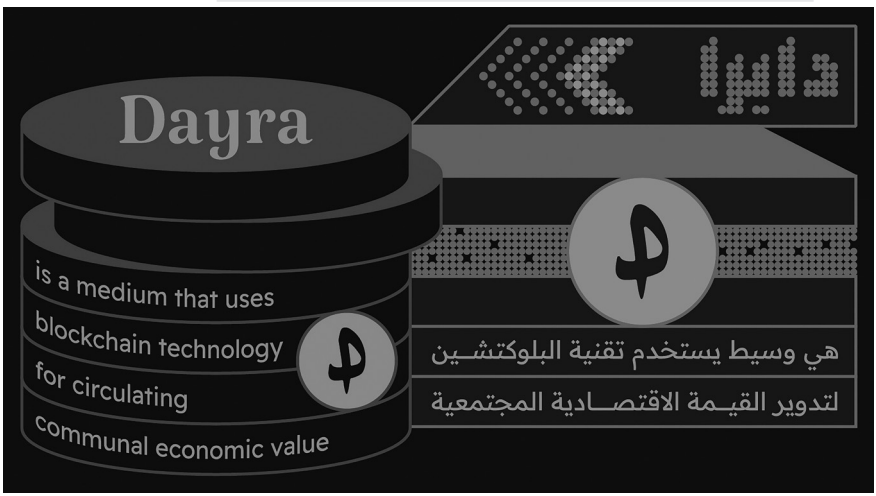
replace individualism with a new tribalism? Is it possible to grow mutualism into a political movement?

DAYRA

The introduction video of Dayra opens with a beautiful analogy: "Not having a measuring tape doesn't mean the table does not exist. We only don't know its dimensions. Same goes for communal resources. Not having money to exchange them doesn't mean they don't exist or that they don't have value."[15] Dayra is Arabic for circle or circulating. It is also the name of a governance model to measure, share, and exchange the value of local resources in the absence of money. This Dayra was developed by the Palestinian collective The Question of Funding to embrace the absence of monetary value as a site of social autonomy, giving prominence to existing communal wealth. Concretely, it is a record of debt within existing trust circles, accounted on the blockchain, which empowers the balancing of complex debt exchange mechanisms within the community. The Dayra website gives an example of how this could work in practice:

> A graphic designer needs a space to give a workshop to generate income. She has no money to rent a space. She joins the Dayra ecosystem and gets validation points. She contacts a cultural institution. They have a space to offer her, but they depend on rent to pay salaries. A farmer wants to join the graphic design workshop to enhance their communication abilities, but they also have no money to pay. This is what happens: The cultural institution mints Dayra from the network for sharing their space with the graphic designer. The graphic designer validates that the cultural institution did offer its venue. As a result, the cultural institution can now pay

part of the salaries in Dayra and the graphic designer gets a space. The graphic designer mints Dayra for the knowledge they shared with the farmer. This process is validated by the farmer using their validation points. The farmer gets knowledge when they couldn't pay for it with money, and the graphic designer gets some Dayra to spend in the Dayra ecosystem.[16]



Screenshot of the video `Dayra: How It Works?', https://vimeo.com/721710848.

15 `Dayra: How It Works?', 2022.

16 Idem.

Dayra is one of many economic experiments in the arts using Web3 technology. Usually, these use crypto tokens that one buys with fiat money (the money you have in your bank account), other cryptocurrencies (Bitcoin or Ethereum), or computing power (the so-called `mining'), which unavoidably implicates the initiative in the hyper-capitalist crypto market. Dayra, on the other hand, is a kind of inverse money currency, in which `minting value' means acknowledging one's indebtedness. It uses blockchain to keep a transparent record of communal debt, while avoiding

the speculation or financialisation that often kills interesting Web3 initiatives.

Dayra is not `innovative'. Rather, it is an update of social reproduction models that have been used by humanity for ages, especially in rural areas. Think of the village bakeries where people buy bread on credit. Maybe the baker notes the purchase in a little notebook. Palestinians call this `ad dafter' (رتفدلا), in former Yugoslavia it is known as `veresija', while in the Netherlands they describe it as `op de pof kopen'. The amount of credit one can use depends on local norms, previous experiences, and general trust. People may also need community members' labour to build a house, creating another type of indebtedness, which is called `owneh' (قنوع) in Arabic, `mobe' in Serbo-Croatian, or `in het krijt staan' in Dutch. These and the many other existing types of barter, community debt, and local discount are not charity. People in local economies simply need each other to survive, with or without money. Dayra builds on these existing practices and extrapolates them. The little notebook becomes a collective ledger on the blockchain. Barter exchanges turn into a complex community credit system, which is still based on trust. Dayra aggregates economic empowerment of the wealth we already have and the things we already do anyway.[17]

With its rare, interesting use of blockchain technology, Dayra conjures important questions about the design of communal economies. Can and should the absence of monetary riches be rethought as community wealth? How to create regenerative, localised economic systems? What is the role of art workers in an economic system like Dayra, and what kind of art practice can be sustained in it?

THE ARTIST PENSION TRUST

Artists and other cultural workers have always tried to create stable, long-term collective income schemes. One of the largest and most ambitious among these schemes was

launched in 2004: the Artist Pension Trust. The idea was an ingeniously simple model in which participating artists would contribute one work of art every year to a common pool collection. These works were to be held in storage for several years, anticipating their value to rise in the meantime. They were then to be gradually sold over the course of 20 years for the benefit of the APT artists, providing them with future financial security.[18] Pooling artworks and maturing them together would give artists a nearly guaranteed, stable pension – a luxury that is highly uncommon among the professional group. When works would be sold, 40% of the proceeds would go directly to the individual artist, and 32% would be divided among artists into the trust based on the number of artworks they had so far deposited. The fund's provision was 28%, a bargain compared to the 50% cut usually taken by galleries. Contrary to many of the models discussed above, the Artist Pension Trust was actually put into practice, with great rigour and ambition. A company called MutualArt was set up and registered in the British Virgin Islands, which in turn established regional funds with representative offices in New York, Los Angeles, London, Leipzig, Mumbai, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Mexico City, and Amman.

17 Read more about Dayra and community wealth in Palestine in Khalili interviewed by Gloerich, `The Economy Is Not Just for Economists', 2025.

18 See: http://www.aptglobal.org/en.

To make the APT's model of collateralised risk and income diversification work, it had to attract artists with some degree of market success and bank on the high probability of a few of them becoming art world superstars. Therefore, each office curated a local pool, inviting a group of around 250 promising mid-career artists to join their node. While risk, as well as profit, were spread among the `community', market logic as such remained unquestioned. This immediately attracted criticism. In *Dark Matter,* Gregory Sholette described the trust as "a private, global investment fund, at the apex of the art market's inflationary bubble" and the

cooperation of artists in it as typical of neoliberal hegemony.[19] "Like workers in other fields made precarious by deregulation," he wrote, "most artists in search of greater financial security are now bypassing collective organising for private market mechanisms such as Artist Pension Trust".[20] About a decade after the trust's founding, the fragile position artists put themselves in with this kind of opportunism (or curiosity) became painfully clear.

19 Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 2011, p. 11.

20 Sholette, `Artistic Labor', 2008.

21 Wagley, `The Artist Pension Trust Had a Utopian Dream to Give Artists a Shared Retirement Fund', 2022. Lydiate, `Art? Pension? Trust?', 2017.

22 Sholette, `Artist Pension Trust (APT) Vs Art Workers' Coalition', 2021.

23 Wagley, `The Artist Pension Trust Had a Utopian Dream to Give Artists a Shared Retirement Fund.'

The Artist Pension Trust was an initiative of the American serial tech entrepreneur Moti Schniberg, an outsider to the field of art. In his design of the economic model, Schniberg had well grasped the immaterial and speculative properties of art on the market, but he forgot about the fact that most artworks are still objects, which need to be handled and stored. Allegedly, shipment and storage costs made the venture financially unfeasible and caused the owners to pull their investments and personnel. As of 2022, the nine regional Artist Pension Trust offices had a total staff count of zero.[21] Meanwhile, participating artists had no idea where their artworks were, and had no way of finding out. "It was a great disappearing act," one participating artist told us when we asked about her experience with the fund. Her works had been shipped off to unknown locations and held under unknown circumstances. Several times, angry groups of artists facing the same problem had to sue the Artist Pension Trust to get their works back at all. In a delightful told-you-so blogpost, Greg Sholette concluded: "They are now treating artists like, well, like artists, as

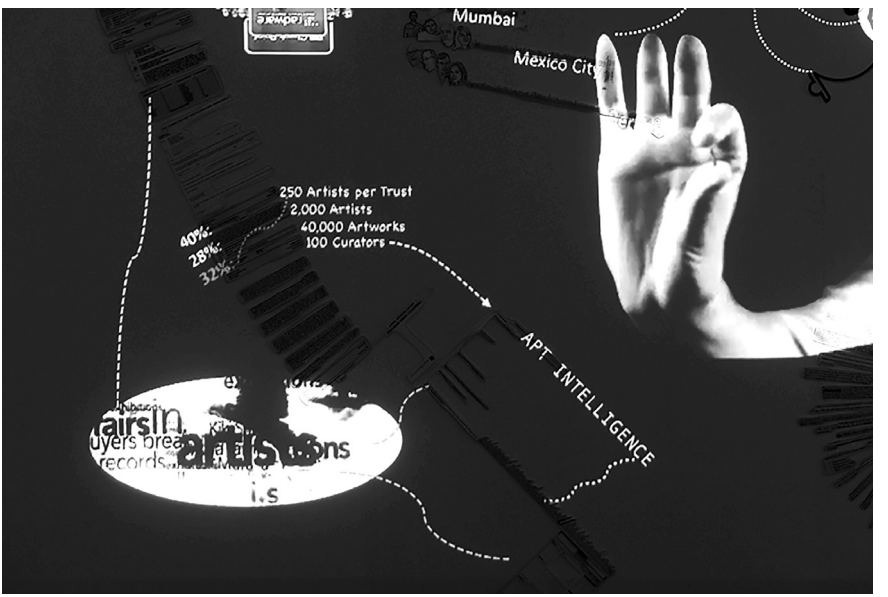
expendable."[22] This begs the question: what is the indispensable part of an artist pension trust, if not the artists?

Now enter the truly baffling part of the scheme. The asset central to Shniberg's start-up was a data collection model. Citing the Artist Pension Trust's patent, a 2022 Artnet article explained this model:

> The `summary' section of [the Artist Pension Trust] patent application describes how databases will be used to `store information about the artists, the works of art that are pooled in the collective investment fund, financial instruments issued to each of the artists in consideration for the works of art contributed by the artists to the fund, and revenues obtained on behalf of the fund through commercialization of the works of art in the fund.' In other words, a key component of the plan for APT had been to record data about the artists and their work trajectories and markets. The patent application also adds that such an effective database should cut down on the need for personnel, suggesting an efficient automated system fueled by information.[23]

This is groundbreaking: the Artist Pension Trust is an unlikely marriage of the traditional art auction model with the data-driven platform economy, disguised as a socialist experiment. The selling of works by a large group of artists around the world would give MutualArt unprecedented early access to primary market data, which would not just help those with access to the data to play the market with insights superior to those of anyone else in the trade, but also to create superior data analysis models – and, ultimately, to sell (access to) these models. The redistribution model turns out to be an art market scheme that turns out to be a data aggregator that turns out to be a data aggregation blueprint. Neither artists nor old-school flippers, but venture capitalists, programmers, and analysts

were the prospective profiteers. The Artist Pension Trust proves that the traditional art market, with its auctions, fairs, and galleries, and the platform economy, with its blockchain, algorithms, data scraping, and NFTs, are no longer separate worlds. Selling art and selling art sales data are one and the same business. The question of the future of the art market is then not so much whether we will see more Beeple sales at Christie's, but how long it will take before data analysts will become auction masters. The same has already happened to fashion designers and football analysts. This, in turn, is part of a larger shift towards the neoliberal financialisation of all social relationships in which the `auction' becomes a hegemonic mode of social interaction. After monetisation, one does not merely buy and sell but bids and sells to the highest bidder in an automated `trustless' process.



Detail from Walid Raad, Translators Introduction: Pension Arts in Dubai, 2011. After he was invited to join the Dubai node of the APT, Raad created this

amazing video tableau exposing some of the structures behind the trust: the technological innovations in statistics; risk management concepts in finance; art as an alternative asset class; culture as an engine of economic growth in the Arab world; text, data mining and face recognition algorithms; and the Israeli military and its links to the Israeli hi-tech sector.

The Artist Pension Trust's elegant co-optation of radical imagination leaves many questions. If the scheme had worked practically (for instance, if it had collected exclusively digital art), would we be applauding it here instead of scrutinising it? What if the venture and its data had been collectively owned and governed, for instance, in a co-operative? Could it have been used to create a small pension for a larger group of artists? Would that have even been a good thing?

THE ECONOMIES TO COME

The cases discussed above are only a handful out of a vast range of art workers' experiments with money and redistribution. We could have discussed Circles Coop, a bottom-up experiment with unconditional basic income by artists, web3 developers, farmers and other local producers in Berlin; or the Centre for Plausible Economies, a platform for mapping and reimagining economic systems in the arts and beyond; or De Kunstambassade, an online artist-run gallery based in Rotterdam which redistributes part of the sales proceeds equally among all participants; or The Sphere, a DAO for circus and other live arts, which aims to create a regenerative flow of resources and creative energy with a mix of blockchain technology and love letter-writing; or the cooperatively run social enterprise CompanyDrinks, which manufactures juices and sodas from locally grown and picked fruits, and uses these to experiment with diverse economies; or the many freelancers

self-organising sick leave insurance into so-called `bread funds'; or Arts Collaboratory, a networked collective that redistributes money from European philanthropic funds to art spaces in the majority world; or the manual for automated tax evasion published by art collective RYBN. Or, of course, we could have discussed lumbung, from lumbung gallery and lumbung press, to lumbung kiosk, and lumbung land.

Some of these cases will be discussed in later chapters of this book. Others have been too often or too perfectly described elsewhere. In any case, our scope could never have been exhaustive, and we felt that the cases above suffice to make a simple point: there are many and *real* alternative art economies besides, below, and especially against capitalism. Art workers designing and making their own economies find collective agency and manage to imagine post-capitalist markets all the time.

These alternatives are not perfect, let alone utopian. Many transvaluation tactics turn out to be organisational experiments rather than redistribution or even revenue models. While there is nothing wrong with that, we have to be honest about the limited capacity of money experiments to address the precarity question head-on. They seldom lead to a direct increase in income. Or if they do, it's hard work for little money, benefiting an exclusive group for a limited amount of time. Sometimes the outcomes are even entirely misguided or counterproductive. But the lessons are bountiful and always worthwhile. For one, it shows how different modes of solidarity or community survival strategies, which are already commonly practiced – like sharing, gleaning, working with informal loans, offering goods or services as open source – should be considered as heterodox economic tactics, and therefore as serious alternatives to commodity markets and the wage economy. This diversity of tactics is to be cherished because if we could identify the single silver bullet to win back the economy, we would have already used it. We know for certain only this: capital finds new ways to

extract value from the 99% every day. So, let's keep experimenting against the ever-evolving forms of capitalist extraction. We know ourselves to be of the multitude, working together towards the economies to come.

IS
UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME
A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL
SOLUTION
FOR PRECARITY?

IF SO,
SHOULD
ARTISTS PLAY
THE ROLE OF
EARLY ADOPTERS
OR
SOLIDARITY ORGANISERS?

WE WANT EVERYTHING: ART AND BASIC INCOME

1 `We Want Everything' is the title of a great novel by Nanni Ballestrini, which tells the story of an archetypal Italian worker in the 1972 Fiat uprising. Borrowing this title was suggested to me by Dalia Maini.

There is a recurring scene in my life. A long, late-night, slightly intoxicated conversation with a friend. Frustrations are exchanged surrounding everything shitty about working in the arts; precarity, juggling side jobs, the application rat-race... With the last sip of the final drink, my friend laments, "If only we had a basic income, that would solve all of our problems." They are tapping into something here, that when all other labour rights struggles fail, there is always the idea of Universal Basic Income to fall back on. Simple, fair, money for all. Unconditional power to reject bullshit jobs. One economic transfiguration to rule them all. Wonderful. But let's be careful. Is UBI a strategic goal, or a story we tell each other to escape political struggle?

WHAT IS BASIC INCOME?

The generally accepted notion of basic income is simple and easy. In the definition of the Basic Income Earth Network, it is a periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means testing or work requirements.[2] Most commonly, it is thought that basic income should be distributed by nation states, that its amount should be defined by the local cost of living, and that it must be sufficient to cover basic living costs like housing, groceries, healthcare insurance, and childcare. Liberated from poverty, recipients of basic income can stop worrying about money on a day-to-day basis and are free to use their time and energy in more creative, fun, and productive ways. It's much easier to volunteer at a soup kitchen, take care of a sick family member, or spend time making art if one doesn't have to worry about bills at the end of the month.

Beyond the obvious benefits for the individual recipients, there are systemic benefits to UBI. Unconditional basic income equals unconditional spending power. Because everyone who receives basic income also spends it, a UBI provision would be a huge boost to the economy. This is especially relevant today, as accelerating AI automation might leave many jobless soon. Basic income can prevent the economy from collapsing due to lack of demand. Furthermore, the implementation of UBI would allow for the reduction of bureaucratic processes. In one fell swoop, UBI could replace unemployment benefits and sick leave schemes, job market reintegration programmes, small business tax cuts, and all the other governmental apparatuses set up to funnel people toward the labour market. Unconditional Basic Income thus cuts costs on bureaucracy and redirects public money, via the pockets of the citizens, directly into the economy. Everybody wins.

2 See: https://basicincome.org.

However, the moment one starts translating this simple idea of basic income into politics and policy, it dissolves into a plethora of practical issues. For starters, how high does a basic income have to be to qualify? If everyone around the world received 2000 dollars per month, that would probably cover a general understanding of `basic'. But if the sum were reduced to 500 dollars per month, it would get trickier. At one third of the average global monthly income (which is around 1500 dollars per person per month), 500 dollars would be a good basis for most of the world's population, but it would leave most people in the affluent and expensive countries of the global north with hardly any security at all. A good case in point is Spain, a country with an average wage level of almost 2500 dollars per month, where renting an apartment in the capital, Barcelona, averages 1500 dollars per month. After years of preparation, the left-wing government of Spain launched a basic income scheme for its citizens in 2020. It provided between 462 and 1050 euros per month.[3]

Not to individuals, but to the most economically vulnerable *families*. An amount so measly that it makes one wonder if some *somethings* are worse than nothing. Does that amount in context even count as a basic income?

Another issue is the question of eligibility. The abbreviation UBI is sometimes used to refer to Universal Basic Income, while others understand it as Unconditional Basic Income. Both interpretations leave us wondering who is supposed to receive a basic income. What, exactly, makes an income `universal' or `unconditional'? The perceived fairness of basic income is its availability to `every individual'. Yet, we live in a system of nation-states that recognise some people as legitimate individuals, while denying that right to others. Is it acceptable if basic income is distributed only to citizens with the right papers? Should migrants with a working visa also be eligible? Sans-papier? And what about a possible age requirement? Should kids get their own basic income, or is it the exclusive right of adults? There is no easy way to imagine basic income as an actual policy without any form of exclusion or conditionality.

3 Rincon, `Living Minimum Income in Spain', 2020.

4 Jäger and Zamora Vargas, *Welfare for Markets*, 2023.

5 Ibid., pp. 33-54.

6 Milton Friedman, cited in ibid., p. 34.

Furthermore, there is the question of payment. Who is responsible for raising and distributing the funds for a basic income? It is possible for nation-states to finance UBI through taxation and to hand out cash to their citizens on a regular basis. Though, such cash hand-outs are considered to be expensive, and many of the issues making universal basic income difficult – like the requirement of citizenship and the varying cost of living in different places – are the very result of the nation-state system. There is also the problem of our political reality to consider. With the emergence of technofeudalism, the likelihood of nation-states implementing basic income shrinks to

a minuscule amount, if anything. Alternatively, dependence on state apparatuses could be avoided. Basic income could be self-organised by people co-operatively creating economic safety nets among (local) communities. There have been some serious experiments in this direction, most notably the pilot Circles in Berlin, in which a group of people gets a basic income through the blockchain. Yet, a self-organised basic income also runs into issues. How to scale up a local basic income system? And, even trickier, how to obtain truly solvent economic circularity within such systems – without reproducing taxation or free market competition logics? The state-led and the self-organised approaches to basic income each have their benefits and problems, but neither is simple. Moreover, they require totally different political organisation strategies.

Finally, the really hard-to-swallow pill is the strong leftist case against basic income. The Marxist historian duo Anton Jäger and Daniel Zamora Vargas wrote a great book, *Welfare for Markets: A Global History of Basic Income*, in which they draw attention to the little known intellectual origins of basic income.[4] Periodical, unconditional cash transfers from the state to every adult citizen were first proposed in the late 1940s by the American free-market crusader Milton Friedman – who called it `Negative Income Tax' (NIT).[5] As Friedman recalls, it "arose as part of thinking about an appropriate structure of the income tax which would take care of averaging fluctuating incomes over time".[6] A marginal idea at first, NIT grew into a broadly liked proposal among economists and politicians, even being adopted by Richard Nixon in the late 1960s. Where did this sudden liking for basic income on the political right come from? Jäger and Vargas explain:

> Friedman's NIT openly rejected any behavioral control of recipients and an emphasis on work. He also refused to stipulate any `duties' that would come with his guaranteed income. The idea's `anti-paternalist' design, especially

> its disregard for work requirements, contrasted strongly with the very labor-centered versions of the postwar welfare state *and* many earlier guaranteed income proposals. [...] Challenging the idea that governments could define social needs, Friedman and his contemporaries began to see the market as an antiauthoritarian tool that would allow citizens to decide how to sustain their livelihoods and fulfill their wants. This approach to welfare would also explain the future traction Friedman's proposal would receive among liberals.[7]

So, in the eyes of Friedman and other neoliberals, Negative Income Tax was the easiest and most `value-free' way to stimulate the economy while reducing the role of the government, deregulating the labour market, and privatising welfare state services. Under the guise of freedom, Friedman's NIT was intended to remove all collective guarantees of social and economic security. Who needs minimum wage or a cap on working hours when there is a basic income? Oh, and you can't pay for private childcare? That's your fault as a Sovereign Consumer. You should've used that basic income better. In short, Jäger and Vargas argue, rather than curtailing the power of capital, establishing a base income merely allows everyone to participate in the market.[8] These are the reasons that advocates of UBI today may find Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk among their ranks, and labour organisers opposing them.[9]

7 Ibid., pp. 35 & 45.

8 Zamora Vargas, `The Case Against a Universal Basic Income', 2017.

9 Jäger and Zamora Vargas, `Epilogue: Basic Income in the Technopopulist Age', in *Welfare for Markets,* pp. 164-180.

I'm not saying that supporting basic income automatically makes one a libertarian. It's still possible to demand UBI *and* universal basic labor rights, *and* universal

basic services like healthcare, education, childcare, and culture. However, with this combination of demands, one might start to sound like a radical left-wing renegade at best, or a hopeless romantic at worst. In any case, the possibility of garnering broad support for the common-sense proposal of basic income is long gone at this point. So, basic income is not exactly simple, and certainly not a miracle solution to end all precarity.

BASIC INCOME FOR ARTISTS

One way people have tried to simplify basic income is by introducing a step-by-step approach. If basic income for all is not immediately feasible, its functionality could be tested on a smaller group of individuals. And where better to start than in the arts, which have been at the forefront of poor labour condition developments for decades? Indeed, the thought of artists as `early adopters' of basic income has been around for a long time.[10] Think of the Art Workers Coalition's list of demands from 1970, discussed in the previous chapter, in which they demand a guaranteed basic income for all.[11] This idea makes total sense at first glance. Most art workers depend on freelance gigs, project funding, or sales, so they have strongly fluctuating and generally low income levels. As we saw in the previous chapter, virtually without exception, new revenue models and income experiments reproduce this structure of intermittent or highly uncertain income. This is also true in the cases of crowdfunding, content subscription models, platform-mediated gigs, crypto products, and so on. If all art workers' income models, traditional and new, lack the same solid basis, wouldn't it make sense to consider all of these income sources as *additional* income? And wouldn't it, then, be only logical to advocate for a *basic* income for the arts?

10 Szreder, `Artistic Projectariat and the Struggle for the Universal Basic Income', 2022.

11 Lippard, `Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History', 1970.

12 Stone, `Ireland Extends Basic Income for Artists Scheme', 2024.
13 Dag, `Basic Income for the Arts in Ireland: Qualitative Report', 2025.
14 Tides Foundation provided fiscal sponsorship, the Mellon Foundation donated 115 million dollars, and the Ford and Stavros Niarchos Foundations each provided 5 million dollars.
15 Creatives Rebuild New York, `Guaranteed Income for Artists: Preliminary Findings', 2024.
16 Edmonds, `Artists Who Received Almost $1,500 a Month from Basic Income Pilot Improved Their Work', 2025.
17 Somers Donnely, `A Basic Income for Artists', 2023.

During the Covid pandemic, this idea was put to the test. Two separate basic income schemes were set up, tailored specifically to artists. In 2022, the Irish government set up the Basic Income for the Arts (BIA) pilot scheme. In a lottery, 2000 artists were selected to receive 325 euros per week for three years. The programme was initially set to run until 2025, but it was extended after positive initial findings from the pilot's first year.[12] Interviews with 50 participants during their third year with basic income showed that the regular cash hand-out:

> has significantly reduced underlying financial stress, has allowed recipients to devote time to research and experimentation which resulted in improved quality and opened new career trajectories. Recipients invested in upskilling and equipment. Recipients are also better able to take care of their physical and mental health. They report a sense of legitimacy and validation and mention the importance of `giving back' to their community.[13]

Around the same time in New York, four philanthropic foundations set up the programme Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY), which donated 125 million dollars toward guaranteed income and employment opportunities to artists across New York State.[14] Between 2022 and 2024, they provided 2400 artists with a guaranteed income of 1000 dollars per month

for 18 consecutive months. Research teams from two universities hired by CRNY to monitor the effects of this scheme drew very positive conclusions in a 2024 report:

> Guaranteed Income works for artists across the domains of financial stability, professional growth, and personal wellbeing. When they receive a Guaranteed Income, artists prioritize debt and savings payments; artists pay their bills; artists choose work that works for them; artists' well-being improves; and artists have more time and space for caregiving.[15]

In short, both artist basic income pilots were found to be a jubilant success. The reports may be biased, since they were commissioned by the funders of the pilots. But the few lucky recipients of artist basic income that I met in informal settings were also universally positive about their experiences. It's hard not to love free cash, and it's hard not to see the positive outcomes. And yet, I think there are some important caveats to be made.

Both the Irish pilot and CRNY were temporary pilots. The private CRNY came to a full stop in 2024. BIA, which is supported publicly, managed to get a one-year extension. The responsible Minister found that "the Basic Income Pilot had been an effective support for the artists in receipt of it".[16] Yet, there are no concrete plans to make BIA a structural provision for all artists in Ireland. The image arising from these pilots, then, is one of basic income as an effective temporary crisis measure. One that can be deployed to keep artists afloat under extreme conditions, like the Covid lockdowns, so that there are still artists left after the crisis has passed and `the industry' can return to its normal state of affairs. Joan Somers Donnely commented that "the BIA, in this context, is a way of testing what happens if you throw scraps to precarious workers, just enough to keep the market in motion."[17]

It is also striking how much CRNY and BIA bend on narratives of exceptionalism. Both justify the support of artists by referencing their generally precarious position, on the one hand, and their exceptional contribution to the vibrancy and liveability of their surroundings, on the other. They buy into the common conception that artists are special people with special roles and needs, making it only logical that they get special treatment. Just how widespread and normalised this idea is can be grasped from an article by Juliana Bidadanure, an associate professor at New York University, specialised in UBI, who argued that "artists *deserve* cash with no strings attached".[18] This exceptionalism is not entirely uncontested. Some critics have pointed out that artists are not alone in their precarity, and questioned why the solution should be exclusive to them.[19] But, generally, it is remarkable how easily people keep saying that `we need a universal basic income for artists', without even noticing the contradiction between `universal' and `for artists'.[20]

18 Bidadanure, `Artists Deserve Cash with No Strings Attached', 2025.

19 For instance, Somers Donnely, `A Basic Income for Artists', 2023, and Hayes, `To BI or Not to BI', 2022.

20 Caust, `Australia Should Have a Universal Basic Income for Artists', 2022.

21 See: https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/2021/01/16/art-for-ubi-manifesto-launching-campaign.

The exclusivity of basic income for artists is especially dubious in the Irish case. Art critic Chris Hayes has pointed out that the BIA pilot was the government's attempt to fulfill a promise to establish a general research commission on an Irish universal basic income. However, as the dust of the Covid crisis has settled, the BIA pilot is running toward the end of its course, and a new administration has taken power; it does not appear that BIA was the first step toward a basic income for everyone in Ireland. On the contrary, it's unclear whether even a small group of

artists will be able to retain this privilege. In hindsight, it seems like artists were not the `early adopters' of a general basic income, but the protagonists in a distraction maneuver showing that the government was doing *something*.

These concerns don't make the needs met by the cash transfers any less real. In that sense, any initiative effectively redistributing money toward art workers has its merits. But when trying to improve the position of art workers, it may be better to focus on specificity rather than exceptionality. For instance, art workers in France and Belgium benefit from tailored access to general social support. Unions and associations have drawn attention to the intermittent nature of gig work in the arts, and their respective governments have allowed art workers to make intermittent use of unemployment benefits. These arrangements are, importantly, *not* a basic income provision. They are conditional and function within the logic of jobs and joblessness. But they *work* for art workers, and they can be justified without any exceptionalism.

ARTISTS FOR BASIC INCOME

Despite all practical intricacies, the simple radicality of a basic income remains irresistible to many art workers. So, if the main problem of basic income for artists is exceptionalism, is it possible to think up another kind of relation between art and basic income? Can we imagine art for UBI instead of UBI for art? This was the goal of the *Art for UBI* campaign launched by the Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI) in 2022.[21]

IRI is a collective of artists, thinkers, and organisers, mainly from Italy, which has an incredibly sharp eye for the state of the art world and often manages to mobilise large groups of art workers around radical politics. They organised a Covid-era digital re-learning group, called *The School of Mutations*, which ended up focusing on art and basic income. Faced by the immediate precarity of

Covid lockdowns and the apparent appetite of Western governments to spend their way through the crisis, they found that "the time has come for a transnational positioning of art workers to strongly demand a universal and unconditional income for society as a whole".[22] The results were two large public gatherings, a Change.org petition, posters, visuals, a book of essays, and, most importantly, a fourteen-point manifesto. The manifesto reads:

1. Universal and Unconditional Basic Income is the best measure for the arts and cultural sector. Art workers claim a basic income, not for themselves, but for everyone.
2. Do not call UBI any measures that do not equal a living wage: UBI has to be above the poverty threshold. To eliminate poverty, UBI must correspond to a region's minimum wage.
3. UBI frees up time, liberating us from the blackmail of precarious labor and from exploitative working conditions.
4. UBI is given unconditionally and without caveats, regardless of social status, job performance, or ability. It goes against the meritocratic falsehoods that cover for class privilege.
5. UBI is not a social safety net, nor is it a welfare unemployment reform. It is the minimal recognition of the invisible labor that is essential to the reproduction of life, largely unacknowledged but essential, as society's growing need for care proves.
6. UBI states that waged labor is no longer the sole means for wealth distribution. Time and again, this model proves unsustainable. Wage is just another name for exploitation of workers, who always earn less than they give.
7. Trans-feminist and decolonizing perspectives teach us to say "NO" to all the invisible and extractive modes of exploitation, especially within the precarious conditions created by the art market.

8. UBI affirms the right to intermittence, privacy and autonomy, the right to stay off-line and not to be available 24/7.
9. UBI rejects the pyramid scheme of grants and of the nonprofit industrial complex, redistributing wealth equally and without unnecessary bureaucratic burdens. Bureaucracy is the vampire of art workers' energies and time turning them into managers of themselves.
10. By demanding UBI, art workers do not defend a guild or a category and depreciate the role that class and privilege play in current perceptions of art. UBI is universal because it is for everyone and makes creative agency available to everyone.
11. Art's health is directly connected to a healthy social fabric. To claim for UBI, being grounded in the ethics of mutual care, is art workers' most powerful gesture of care towards society.
12. Because UBI disrupts the logic of overproduction, it frees us from the current modes of capital production that are exploiting the planet. UBI is a cosmogenic technique and a means to achieve climate justice.
13. Where to find the money for UBI? In and of itself UBI questions the actual tax systems in Europe and elsewhere. UBI empowers us to reimagine financial transactions, the extractivism of digital platforms, liquidity, and debt. No public service should be cut in order to finance UBI.
14. UBI inspires many art collectives and communities to test various tools for more equal redistribution of resources and wealth. From self-managed mutual aid systems based on collectivising incomes, to solutions temporarily freeing cognitive workers from public and private constraints. We aim to join them.[23]

22 Baravalle, Braga, and Riccio, *Art for UBI (Manifesto)*, p. 7.
23 Ibid., pp. 128-144.

The *Art for UBI (manifesto)* illustrates the attractive, radical simplicity of basic income. Basic income relieves the working classes of poverty; it abolishes wage slavery; it acknowledges and rewards previously invisibilised reproductive labour and care work; it halts the exploitation of scarce natural resources and of (formerly) colonised peoples; and it frees up time for play and creativity. Highlighting the convergence of Marxist, autonomist, feminist, eco-conscious, accelerationist, luddite, anti-colonial, and critical finance perspectives, IRI presents basic income as one of the most fundamentally intersectional proposals possible. Many on the left claim that we need broad coalitions and needs-focused organising, so here's one claim we can all stand behind: a universal and unconditional basic income.

24 Braga, `Techno-Utopia', 2023.

25 Ibid., p. 34.

The Art for UBI campaign also clarifies the productive role art workers can play in UBI advocacy as the driving force of radical imagination. The campaign's existence is a direct result of artistic experimentation with heterodox economies. In the essay `Techno-Utopia: The New Technology Challenge to Infrastructure Ecosystems', Emanuele Braga describes how IRI's insistence on Universal Basic Income grew out of two decades of niche experiments with redistribution by artists, activists, researchers, and hackers in Milan, Italy. In 2012, a group called The Art Workers occupied a former slaughterhouse in Milan and established the legendary social centre MACAO. Until its eventual eviction in 2017, MACAO grew into one of the most important alternative art spaces in Italy. It was run on a self-organised community governance model that included experiments with Bitcoin: all members of a core group of volunteers would receive a small basic income in crypto every month, regardless of the exact number of hours worked. In the following years, they collaborated with the international vanguard of altfin on several large crypto

experiments, including La moneta del Comune, Common Coin, Faircoin, the Bank of the Commons, and Common Wallet.[24] Many of the same people would also come to be involved in Circles in the early 2020s.

"After these experiments with cryptofinance, digital currencies and with conflicting mutualism in autonomous organizations," Braga writes, "it is evident how the concept of Unconditional Basic Income becomes increasingly central even in small-scale interventions".[25] UBI offers the political imaginary required to shift from marginalised redistribution schemes within the arts towards the development of new macroeconomic visions by coalitions of artists and workers. In this new vision, art workers have no claim to exceptional rights or early adopter privileges, but still have an important role to fulfil. Toni Cade Bambara famously said that the role of art is to make the revolution irresistible. Basic income, in this case, is the revolution.

DYSFUNCTIONALLY FUNCTIONAL

The idea of basic income in the arts seems simple, easy, and fair. But a closer inspection shows that the contrary is true. In the most practical sense, basic income isn't simple. Answering basic questions – for whom and how high basic income should be and who should pay – will fracture the broad common-sense coalition of supporters. Even if these practical issues may be overcome, basic income remains politically contested, with strong left-wing cases both in favour and against the idea. Does basic income empower sovereign people, or does it create sovereign consumers?

Throwing art into the mix adds further complexity. Artists are often considered the perfect early adopters of universal basic income, but Covid-era pilots offering basic income to artists turned out to be exclusive, temporary band-aids for widespread systemic precarisation. At the

same time, UBI remains one of the most powerful imaginaries in radical art organising and campaigning, which empowers the political orientation of self-organised experiments in heterodox economies. If there is any bottom-line clarity, it is a fundamental contradiction. As long as it doesn't work, basic income can function, but once it starts to work, it stops functioning. The functioning of UBI as a radical idea and its capacity to work as a policy here and now are mutually exclusive.

WHO'S
THE SUBJECT
OF THIS BOOK?

HOW CAN WE,
AS ART WORKERS,
PRODUCTIVELY
THINK ABOUT
THE CONTRADICTIONS
OF OUR
CLASS POSITION?

CREATIVE CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS: TODAY'S ART OF THE WORKING CLASS

"I strive to look poor.
I drive an 89 Volvo wagon.
I live in a million dollar artist loft
my daddy bought me for graduating art school.
I hate my dad."
Hipster Barista meme

There is a general confusion about class composition under post-neoliberal capitalism.[1] Mostly: who is the working class? There is an even more specific confusion about the class position of art workers. Are art workers, *workers*? While these questions might seem academic or even trivial, they have serious consequences for the organisation of labour and the representation of workers. Who and what are we? Who are our comrades, and who are our adversaries? How to break the wheel of disorganisation? How to collectivise and resist?

THE AUTHOR AS PRODUCER

In his groundbreaking book *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923, György Lukács for the first time foregrounded `class consciousness' in Marxist theories of organisation.[2] Rather than describing the position of the working class as an enumeration of data (Klasse-an-sich), he explored whether there is a unified standpoint or a shared consciousness among members of the working class (Klasse-für-sich). Following in Lukács's footsteps, Walter Benjamin wrote his famous text on *The Author as Producer* in 1934, formulating a simple, sharp principle for class-conscious cultural work.[3] In short, he insisted that it is the responsibility of an art worker to understand their position as a contemporary producer, and, given the social, historical, and technological circumstances, to carefully determine their medium and mode of production accordingly. For instance, Benjamin argued that novelists

should abandon the traditional medium of the novel in favour of the faster, more accessible medium of the newspaper, which would better serve the goal of `political progress'. One could argue that we face the same question today, except that the positive, universal goal of political progress is replaced by the more fragmented and bitter aim of resistance against political regression. What should authors produce in the cataclysmic mess of techno-feudalism?

1 With `post-neoliberal capitalism', I mean the state of the world after the disintegration of US hegemony, and the collapse of belief in `rule of law', social justice and human rights, and global free trade. Some argue that we no longer live under capitalism (but, for instance, in technofeudalism), while others believe we are merely seeing a reconfiguration of capital in a multipolar world. In any case, the self-evident monopolar, `there is no alternative'-state of the world which characterised neoliberalism after 1989 clearly no longer exists.

2 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness,* 1923.

3 Benjamin subtitled the text `Address at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Paris, April 27, 1934', but it was certainly not delivered as a lecture at that time and in that place. It was most probably first published posthumously. The essay is available in full on the Marxist Internet Archive: https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1970/author-producer.htm.

However, translating the author as a producer-principle to the present-day context is not as simple as a cheeky, postmodern inversion. One of the core successes of neoliberalism has been to replace working-class consciousness with internalised micro-entrepreneurialism. In the book *Speculation as Mode of Production*, Marina Vishmidt has shown that this is especially true for artists who happily jump on the bandwagon of speculative capital and become some of capital's most tragic agents. There is, in other words, very little ground to adopt Benjamin's assumption that art workers have a (latent) class consciousness. Before asking "What does the author as a producer produce

today?", we must first consider: How can the author today understand themselves as a producer once again?

THE ART WORKER

In response to this question, people working in the arts – including myself – have taken to calling ourselves `art workers'. Historically, this notion originated in the Constructivist and Productivist avant-gardes of the 1920s, the very same years in which Lukács conceptualised class consciousness. Its emergence was closely linked to social realist aesthetic positions during the Popular Front era, such as the Congress of Cultural Workers in Lviv, where artists and writers declared their solidarity with workers in the 1930s. It was only much later, in 1969, that it was taken up in the West by the New York-based Art Workers Coalition.

I believe that the most recent rediscovery of `art worker' is related to the rise of social practice art. But it does not necessarily indicate a rediscovered class consciousness. For instance, how do we approach one's `identification' as an art worker in the face of the fact that only 8% of artists in the UK today have a working-class background?[4] In the essay *In a Class of Our Own? Art Workers and the Working Class*, Mia van den Bos writes: the "problem with the term `art worker' is that it gestures towards, whilst simultaneously revealing nothing about, class. [...] `Art worker' elides different class positions behind the precarious reality of freelance art work, without recognising that a class-based selection process has already occurred before the first invoice is sent."[5] `Art worker' could then be just another trendy buzzword used to improve the social status of artists, in this case, only by performing affinity with the working class. As an aspirational fetish in the heads of self-identifying art workers, the notion `working class' becomes partially or entirely divorced from material reality.

On the other hand, the words we use shape our understanding of art and its role in society. For instance, in the book *Art Work*, Katja Praznik argues that the use of the term `art worker' inherently implies a socialist understanding of art as a commonly available public good, which is, by definition, opposed to the capitalist notion of the `work of art' as an exclusive commodity.[6] Van den Bos, too, gives `art worker' the benefit of the doubt, arguing that it can engender a sense of broader solidarity among precarious workers, and prompt conversations about how class "dictates who can and cannot afford to make, write about or curate art and therefore what kind of class interests and perspectives are furthered in the art world".[7] The question, in short, is not one of `correct identification', but of revamping the historically productive analytical notion of class for the more complex reality of artistic production in post-neoliberal capitalism, which could, in turn, empower the organisation of art production in opposition to the class-based selection process before the first invoice.

4 Brook, a.o. `Social Mobility and "Openness" in Creative Occupations since the 1970s', 2022. The British Sociological Association, which publishes this journal, uses a positivist definition of `working class', characterised by low levels of economic, social, and cultural capital, though it is not completely deprived.

5 Van den Bos, `In a Class of Our Own?', 2023.

6 Praznik, *Art Work*, 2021.

7 Van den Bos, `In a Class of Our Own?, 2023.

We don't have to start these conversations from scratch. Many thinkers have theorised contemporary class composition and offered possible pathways to a new class consciousness that encompasses the strange and contradictory experience of life as an art worker. What follows is a leisurely stroll along some of these theories. Where we will meet precarians, projectarians, cybertarians, cognitarians, and other members of emergent (dangerous?) classes along the way.

PRECARIAT

Since the 1980s, deregulation of labour markets, privatisation, increasing numbers of freelancers, and other trends in post-Fordist neoliberalism have structurally increased levels of precarity among workers in the West. Guy Standing, one of the most prominent thinkers on class composition today, has described the collective experience of decreased material and psychological welfare as that of the `precariat'.[8] Quintessential to this precarian experience, as I see it, is a twofold extension of work: `sideways', the separation of work and leisure diffused by intermittent employment and continuously being `on call'; and `frontal', work that is extended indefinitely in the absence of sick leave insurance and pension schemes. Without job security, the work never ends.

If one were to make a list of precarian occupations, `artist' would certainly feature on it. The Netherlands, where I live and work, is known for its attractive funding system and relatively good social provisions. But the average artist in the Netherlands earned a gross income of just over 18 thousand euros in 2019 (compared to the average income of 32 thousand among the working population), with 80% of people in the visual arts working as freelancers.[9] In 2017, a government-commissioned independent review concluded that art workers have poor bargaining positions, are often not insured against occupational disability, have low pension accruals, and have a high risk of unemployment.[10] So, even in a country with relatively high levels of cultural funding and general social safety, many art workers can simply not afford to do their jobs. This is, of course, not a regulatory accident that governments intend to repair. Theoreticians like Isabell Lorey, Judith Butler, and Wendy Brown have shown that governance through precarisation is at the core of the neoliberal project.[11] With its consistently rising numbers of self-employed workers, art and culture have been the perfect testing grounds for neoliberal

labour market policies. Artists are, in other words, at the forefront of flexibilisation and precarisation, alongside couriers, taxi drivers, and other (mostly platform-mediated) gig workers. If art workers today can make any claim of avant-gardism, it must be their membership of platform capitalism's flex-work avant-garde.

8 Standing, *The Precariat*, 2011.

9 See: https://www.ditzijnonzehelden.nl/nl.

10 SER and RvC, `Passie gewaardeerd', 2017.

11 Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 2015; Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 2017.

12 Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, 2019. The `digital revolution' has obviously increased the volume of bullshit jobs, with its endless expansion of click work, content moderation, search engine optimisation, and so on.

A further important characteristic of the precariat, as Standing observes, is the high amount of invisible and mostly unremunerated labour performed. In the arts, we continuously rewrite our CVs and portfolios, update our websites, submit funding applications, practice, study, develop skills, and learn – all in our own time. Then, of course, there is the bulk of socially coded `lifestyle' work which `doesn't feel like work': going to exhibitions, openings and reading groups, having dinners with collectors, social media engagement, and generally taking care of our `visibility' and `relevance'. Again, art workers are not alone in this. Marxist feminists like Bojana Kunst, Leigh Claire La Berge, Katja Praznik, and Silvia Federici have argued that artists' experiences of invisible, underpaid labour mirror those of domestic workers and other precarious workers in society.

While it's hard to challenge the concept of precarity, or its proliferation, critics have contested Standing's idea of the precariat as the new dangerous class because they find the material divisions among people affected by precarisation too great. On the one hand, the precariat includes people working bullshit jobs (which David Graeber defines as jobs that are essentially irrelevant in the eyes

of those who execute them).[12] However, on the other hand, the precariat would also include the group described as the professional-managerial class (or PMC for short). The PMC is a steadily growing group of highly educated urban desk workers who perform managerial or consulting tasks. While their work creates little to no use value, members of the PMC would not typically describe their own work as a bullshit job, and even if they don't have a steady contract, they are usually well-paid. It has therefore been argued that the precariat is socially too loose to ever become a dangerous class. The material interests of the members of the precariat, these critics say, simply don't align. This will be a recurring theme in all of the class composition theories we will encounter: the conceptualisation of new coalitions, alliances, and social groups inevitably has to account for material disparities, alongside a more cultural diversity, among the members of whatever new revolutionary subject is proposed.

COGNITARIAT

A second theoretical tradition that deserves our attention is operaismo. Operaismo, or workerism, emerged in Italy in the 1960s and `70s as a coalition of factory workers and, to lesser extent, house workers, university students, artists, and intellectuals.[13] They rebelled against the exploitation of workers in the new factories of Fiat and other megacorporations, but also against the existing workers' unions and political parties. They did not demand better payments or decent housing, instead, they wanted *everything*: autonomy, communist liberation, and the total abolition of labour.[14] This foregrounding of an end to `wage slavery' swayed many disillusioned workers to join the movement, but it also posed a difficulty in the application of classical Marxist doctrines. Because what is class struggle beyond work? Operaismo, it turned out, required an entirely new conception of class. Mario Tronti, one of

operaismo's leading thinkers, formulated this challenge as follows: "The cultural hieroglyphs need deciphering: the scientific jargon must be translated into our own illustrious class vernacular."[15] This kind of translation is exactly what many thinkers in and after the operaist generation have attempted, resulting in many unique, provocative, and often hopeful theories of emergent class composition.

13 Jacopo Galimberti wrote a great book on the relation between operaismo and art. See: Galimberti, *Images of Class*, 2022.

14 Nanni Ballestrini published a famous novel titled *We Want Everything* (1971), which tells the story of a worker from the South who becomes an agitator and strike leader during Italy's `Hot Autumn' of 1969.

15 Tronti, *Workers and Capital*, 2019 (1970), p. 283.

16 Bifo, *The Soul at Work*, 2009.

The theory I want to highlight here is that of the `cognitariat'. The word cognitariat was coined in the late 2000s by Franco `Bifo' Berardi in *The Soul at Work*.[16] In this book, Bifo stipulated that creatives and other workers in the `knowledge economy' are the new production line workers, occupying their dedicated spot at a global, fully digital conveyor belt of `semiocapitalism'. This equation of knowledge workers with production line workers is, deliberately, not immediately obvious. The high productivity of cognitarians stems from their freedom to feel unique, creative, and therefore motivated. They can pick their own laptops, freely compete for gigs, and work in their favorite coffee bar at hours of their own choosing. But, Bifo argues, the actual work these people do (customer journey design, project management, community building) is just as standardised as the factory work of their grandparents. In other words, the cognitarian is coerced into cultivating and performing exactly the right amount of instrumental creativity and uniqueness (no less, because that would reduce productivity, and no more, because that would make the worker ungovernable).

This tendency of capital to appropriate the very part of us that we feel is most uniquely *ours* introduces an

entirely new form of alienation. Cogniatrians are not alienated from their bodies, as the factory conveyor belt worker described by Marx and Engels was, or from their consciousness, as theorised by Lukács, but an alienating split occurs in their very souls. Our creativity remains part of us, but it is estranged from us, because it is controlled by capital. Of course, new forms of alienation require new forms of resistance. It therefore follows that the struggle against capital's alienation today should prioritise taking back the productive forces of creativity, and the cultivation of an unalienated, radical imagination. This matter is not merely academic or hypothetical. Nor is it outdated. On the contrary, its urgency is a key concern in some of the most important political projects of the contemporary global Left. In 2025, Fernando Haddad, the finance minister in Lula's socialist government of Brazil, phrased the central political challenge of his Workers' Party as follows:

> There is also another emerging force, namely the creative forces of capitalism. There is a vast literature of the contingent of people who sell their labour power, but their power is much more a creative force than a productive force. The Italians often call it the `cognitariat'. [...] It is necessary to recognise that its emancipatory struggle today depends on the understanding that the non-propertied classes are not homogeneous. They have different perspectives. Even from the aesthetic point of view, from the cultural point of view. That is the role of politics: to forge a common goal between them, something that won't emerge mechanically from the economy and that will only emerge from the political activity of a party.[17]

Like Standing's theory of the precariat, Bifo foregrounds the role of precarity and precarisation as the dominant form of government of contemporary capitalism.

Regulatory power over cognitarians is no longer enforced by clocking in and out of work, fixed low pay, recurring evaluations, bureaucratic workload, or mandatory team building outings. Instead, the cognitarian is subjected to a free market competition of all against all, the benchmarks of vibes and lifestyle, and the certainty that there is no safety net. In Bifo's view, this shift in mode of governance, alienation, and exploitation marks a decisive turning point in history. Precarity, he says outright, is an era. This position gives a whole new dimension to the idea of artists as the flex-work avant-garde. If this is true, it must be possible to catch glimpses of another world through the cracks in political reality. Even if art is not here to save the world, the field remains an early adopter of the flex work in which independently working people have experienced high levels of precarity for decades. This experience might have taught art workers some lessons that are of interest to other workers under neoliberal regimes, providing a basis for new, post-corporatist models of organising. Let us, then, zoom in on the specific conditions of art within the global, digitally mediated production chains of contemporary capitalism.

17 Denvir, `Brazil and the World System w/ Fernando Haddad', 2025.

18 Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor*, 2008.

PROJECTARIAT

The first thing to notice about work and class in the arts, is a persistent cognitive dissonance. Many artists somehow think that the market is not where their practice is, and their practice is not where the market is, despite the extreme proximity between the two. In his book *Why Are Artists Poor*, Hans Abbing has called this ambivalence the `Janus face' of the art world.[18] When art and market meet, the clash between informal, precarious, low-paid, self-organised practice, and the big money and splendour seen in art fairs, blue-chip galleries, and auction houses often

leads to cognitive dissonance. For instance, I'm reminded of an artist who told me that she was invited to a luxurious dinner with the patrons of an exhibition she took part in. She enjoyed the champagne and lobster, but afterwards returned to eating crackers for a week at home, unable to afford anything else. She was left with the feeling that the whole affair had been a mix-up, that she had been part of something she should not have been.

On closer inspection, the popular compartmentalisation of different `sides' or even `art worlds' does not hold up. In *Seven Days in the Art World*, Sarah Thornton described how the circuits of artist studios, art education, magazines, auctions, galleries, fairs, and prizes may follow their own protocols and habits but are in the end all interrelated and interdependent.[19] Gregory Sholette went several steps further and, in the book *Dark Matter*, showed how unsuccessful artists (he calls them `prefailed') are the dark matter of the art world.[20] To identify successful artists worthy of astronomic investments, market players like gallerists, collectors, and advisors need to be able to discern the contrast with a much larger group of failed artists. Unsuccessful artists are therefore the dark matter, the invisible connective tissue churned out by art academies in large quantities, without whom the entire system would implode. Art workers, in short, are a fundamental part of a system they feel fundamentally disconnected from, and that structurally keeps them precarious.

Rethinking class composition with these systemic traits of artistic labour in mind, Kuba Szreder coined the notion of `the projectariat'.[21] The projectariat includes those artists, curators, academics, writers, assistants, and technicians who earn their livelihood moving between short-term contracts or commissions, the point being, of course, that this is the case for the vast majority of art professionals. Projectarians experience a contradictory privilege; often highly mobile, they are carried in the international circuits of contemporary art along with some

of the wealthiest of the so-called `1%'. But their work is insecure. Typically, they are also laden with debt incurred to pay for the educational credentials required to access this mobile existence. Projectarians make up a `poverty jetset', for whom the spectre of impoverishment looms as each project ends, making the project the dominant structuring factor in their life.[22]

19 Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, 2008.
20 Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 2010.
21 Szreder, *ABC of the Projectariat,* 2021, pp. 192-197.
22 Berardini, `How to Survive International Art', 2014.
23 Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor?*, 2008.
24 Szreder, *ABC of the Projectariat*, 2021, pp. 15-17.
25 A concrete example: in the absence of financial remunerations, artists making exhibitions are often expected to accept payment in exposure, network, the chance to sell work to visitors, and other future opportunities. Brad Troemel calls this payment in `clout tokens'.

Yet, it would be naïve to understand projectarians as mere victims. Underpayment of artistic labour is a societal norm, but by and large, it is reproduced *within* the art world, in a phenomenon that Hans Abbing called `art ethos'.[23] According to this popular belief, one does not become an artist for financial gain but to fulfill one's destiny. Therefore, poverty is proof of the real deal. Conversely, the demand for payment of artistic labour is, by definition, a betrayal of art. How, then, are art workers supposed to survive? One of the entries in Szreder's book *ABC of the Projectariat* is the sharply ironic concept of `Artyzol'. It combines the Polish term for artist (artysta) with a brand name for Communist-era insecticide spray, `Muchozol'.[24] Artworld events generate clouds of artyzol, and the intoxicating fumes are typically supposed to sustain art workers in place of actual remuneration.[25] The smell of `artyzol' evokes the grandeur of contemporary art but is also slightly toxic. It embodies the strange relationship between toxicity and intoxication that surrounds the

international art world. Artists may not actively support the exploitative nature of the art market (and its hostile takeover of whatever is left of public art institutions), but they silently accept its terms of engagement, and probably enjoy being part of an exclusive social circle. In a review of Szreder's book, Kim Charnley summarised: "Contemporary art's heady extravaganza of free market values depends on banal exploitation. Actually, the projectariat produces the artyzol that perpetuates its own exploitation."[26]

ENTREPRECARIAT

We must, unfortunately, push the point of material and ideological complicity further. A growing group of (young) creatives identifies with the creative industries. The flexible and critical thinking that makes them so creative, and the fact that they don't want to sit still, make them extremely enterprising. They see opportunities, and they want to take the initiative. They find their way – sometimes easily, sometimes with great difficulty – on the market. Precarious but free, they live from gig to gig, hopping between side jobs and cheap studios. Silver laptops, inspirational posters, impressive internships, self-help books, chai lattes, productivity apps, a 128-page portfolio, and other outward displays of cultural entrepreneurship embellish their precarious existence. They try to shape their own lives with the resources they have: staying positive, seeing solutions, and developing innovative business models. They might still try to find their way into public institutions and funding bodies, but also experiment with crypto, crowdfunding, and corporate assignments.

Thanks to this focus on freedom, flexibility, and self-reliance, the difference between precarious work and self-employment gradually blurs until it eventually becomes imperceptible. Thus, these cultural workers are initiated into the `entreprecariat' of the creative industry, to use

Silvio Lorusso's apt term.[27] This is also the core of what autonomy means in the neoliberal sense: dogmatically staying positive, thinking in solutions, business models, and innovations, with the inexhaustible belief that one will manage to make it alone. The members of creative industries-compatible entreprecariat mine crypto, raise money with crowdfunding campaigns, create wall decoration for the ultrarich, make food art for conferences, draw manga on Twitch, make documentaries about social design, sell ecologically sustainable merchandise, design virtual fashion, have a following on Patreon or Substack, sell books at independent art book fairs, and create NFTs.

26 Charnley, `Book Review', 2023.

27 Lorusso, *Entreprecariat*, 2019.

There is nothing wrong with trying one's luck in the creative industries, or with making a good living (it happens). But we cannot ignore the fact that individual declarations of autonomy in the creative industries generally come down to dependence on the market, with the artist in practice often being happy to work for a platform and a pittance. In the fusion of autonomy and entrepreneurship, the art ethos – thought dead in the creative industries – re-enters through the back door: one has to make sacrifices to be able to do one's `dream job'.

This transformation means that autonomy has become the responsibility of the individual, financially as well as intrinsically. It is permissible for entreprecarians to retain an autonomous, non-lucrative practice, as long as one also participates in society in a `productive' way. A serious problem here is that an individualised notion of independence or autonomy plays into the hands of managerial instrumentalisation. A self-regulating sector, where people take care of each other in perfect harmony with the market (read: where cultural workers divide their poverty among themselves), is right up the alley of a neoliberal manager. The entreprecariat, in other words, is the perfect neoliberal subject.

CYBERTARIAT

Working conditions on digital platforms like Patreon and Substack have already come up a few times. It is no coincidence that the rise of digital technology and the notion of creative industries coincided, and it became clear early on that the advent of the internet would revolutionise `creative' labour. For instance, in 2009, Rosalind Gill published the book *Technobohemians or the New Cybertariat?* based on conversations with a new professional group that had emerged in Amsterdam: web designers and developers. She asked:

> What are we to make of someone who says they love their work and cannot imagine doing anything they enjoy more, yet earn so little that they can never take a holiday, let alone afford insurance or a pension? How are we to think about a person who is passionate about the creative work they do up to 80 hours per week yet feels fearful that they will not be able to have the children they long for because of the time and money pressures they face? [28]

Fifteen years later, web designers and developers in the West find themselves not too badly off in economic terms, but there is still a large cohort of exploited cybertarians. Web work has grown into an enormous, technofeudal outsourcing industry with its workforce based mainly in India, the Philippines, and other places in the `majority world'. Their overlords (Zuck, Musk, etc.) are the members of the small `virtual class'. This class enemy has been described by Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein in *Data Trash: The Theory of the Virtual Class* as deeply authoritarian, technocratic, corporate, autistic, and techno-optimist.[29] The 1994 book remains one of the sharpest analyses of the mass psychological forces that shaped the early web (social weak links, instant information, post-historical

depoliticisation, global markets-opportunism, the desire to abandon wetware, and so on) as part of a concerted political effort to accelerate capitalism. It also perfectly shows that recent phenomena like the alt-right, the manosphere, and the mainstream popularity of Luigi Mangione are the expected cultural projections of the virtual class and those who share its nihilist `Will to Virtuality' rather than disruptive or subversive subcultures.[30]

28 Gill, *Technobohemians or the New Cybertariat?*, 2009, p. 9.

29 Kroker and Weinstein, *Data Trash*, 1994.

30 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Luigi_Mangione.

31 Lorusso, `The Elephant in the Device', 2021. Fun fact: Venture capitalist Marc Andreessen is heavily invested in Substack.

32 https://networkcultures.org/blog/2025/12/22/a-review-of-a-sexual-history-of-the-internet-the-influencer-theorist

33 Silvio Lorusso and Morgane Billuart have more to say about the topic of digital cultural gig work. For instance, in Billuart, *Becoming the Product*, 2025, and Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do*, 2023.

Art workers are not exactly part of the cybertarian workforce found in click and troll farms. However, nowhere can the distinct downward social mobility of art workers be felt as clearly as online. While paid work in institutions is evaporating, people naturally turn to platforms. They take online commissions to make websites, illustrations, or 3D renders for a quick buck on Fiverr, harvest engagement on socials, and, especially, put their hopes in the new subscription-based publishing platforms like Substack.[31] Their life turns into a retrace with the machines, dominated by a simple, persistent dogma: crack the algorithm, or be cracked by the algorithm. Some find their calling as an influencer theorist, but most end up as lumpen slop creators.[32] The art world has been transformed less by the extravaganza of `stupid' NFT money than by the extremely precarious conditions of online gig work.[33]

I can imagine that the `riot of the -riat' presented above has provoked eye-rolls, or at least some nervous laughter. Who needs precariats, entreprecariats, projectariats, cybertariats, cognitariats, affectariats, and so on? Why make class struggle so complex? Are people afraid to engage with, or worse, incapable of recognising, the good old *proletariat*? Yet, I think we have strategic reasons to insist on the complexity of class composition theory. If things were so simple, why are art workers in general so confused about their class position, and so badly organised? Is this not the classic issue of the `little person': producing in an extractive system that they struggle to understand, let alone control? Of course, we won't be returning to the days of Great Leaders on the left, who will explain to us how history will unfold and what our role in it will be. After the collapse of the grand narratives, ours can only be a Marxism without guarantees, as Stuart Hall beautifully called it.[34] Let us, then, allow ourselves the freedom of organic theory, so that we might glean from different texts and experiences, and speculate together. The point is not to find a correct terminology (language) or to engage in edgy cosplay (identity), but to formulate an effective class analysis that is true to our time (praxis). The inconvenient truth we can learn from Benjamin's 100-year-old essay is that the art of the working class can only be defined in relation to our historical and material circumstances. The work never ends, not even with Marxism.

I wrote the first version of this chapter shortly after the Dutch general election in November 2023, which resulted in a landslide victory for Geert Wilders's extreme-right Freedom Party. It was not the first surge of extreme right-wing political momentum in the Netherlands. But it was the first time Wilders's party became the largest in the Dutch parliament, and also the first time they managed to form a government coalition (thanks to the liberal party

and two Christian Democrat factions who decided to `listen to the people'). In other words, this election result marked the end of the thirty years of neoliberal government in the Netherlands. Like many others, I wondered how to deal with this new reality. What is the art of the working class in a country where post-neoliberal populists govern over a crumbling welfare state? How do we anticipate, respond, and organise?

34 Hall, `The Problem with Ideology', 1968.

I attended a meeting organised by Platform BK to digest the election results together amongst cultural workers in December 2023. I overheard a statement by Matthijs De Bruijne, an artist I admire for his continuous dedication to the art of the working class: "We have been making art for the elites for three decades. Now, we want to make art for the people again." His words have since stuck with me. In my mind, they perfectly summarise the core question of organising art workers in the world beyond art today.

De Bruijne's words resonate with a broader trend on the left, which doesn't try to defend nitty-gritty class notions, but instead asserts the rights and political power of *the people* as a unifying principle. A good example is the new French political party La France Insoumise, which has managed to build a strong political party with socialists, Trotskyists, social democrats, and others from the formerly fragmented Left, without resorting to the xenophobic rhetoric often found among the populist left. The principle behind the party is a new general collectivism, which party leader Jean-Luc Mélanchon explains as follows:

> The working class is not, in our analysis,
> the sole revolutionary actor of history.
> In our view, the revolutionary actor
> is the people. It is made up of workers
> and employees, in short, the working class,
> millions of unemployed people who work
> from time to time, millions of young people
> in training, millions of retirees.

> Of course, you could slap a label on this and say: they're all workers! They used to be workers, they are retired workers, or they are workers in training. But that is metaphysics, not historical materialism. People are what they are. And yet, this group, the people, is caught up in a relationship of domination and exploitation by the oligarchy.[35]

Whatever our class position, we, art workers, are part of the people, subject to the exploitation of the people, and contributors to the power of the people. We share common needs for housing, education, healthcare, and culture with everyone else. We are, in that sense, entirely ordinary and nonspecific. At the same time, we possess an important set of skills, such as highly developed aesthetic sensibility, media literacy, and interdisciplinarity. Therefore, we may be attributed a special responsibility in support of a common political project: to produce art of the people.

35 Denvir, `A Conversation w/ Jean-Luc Mélanchon', 2025.

I would love to be able to say exactly what art of the people looks like today. But however long and hard I try to think about this question, all I can come up with are suggestions and speculations. A minimal requirement is some form of radical imagination to fight capitalist realism. In other words, it should render the end of capitalism imaginable. (This much is easy to say.) Furthermore, art of the people could manifest as the return to tried-and-tested methods of agitation – either agitprop or neo-punk. It may be fully embedded in the political project of building an Online Popular Front. But art of the people could just as well materialise as the development of new media outlets to counter the insecure-white-male-teen-to-right-wing-radical-pipeline, or in the organising of social unions. Moreover, I would not rule out the continued cultural and political potential of localist perspectives, in

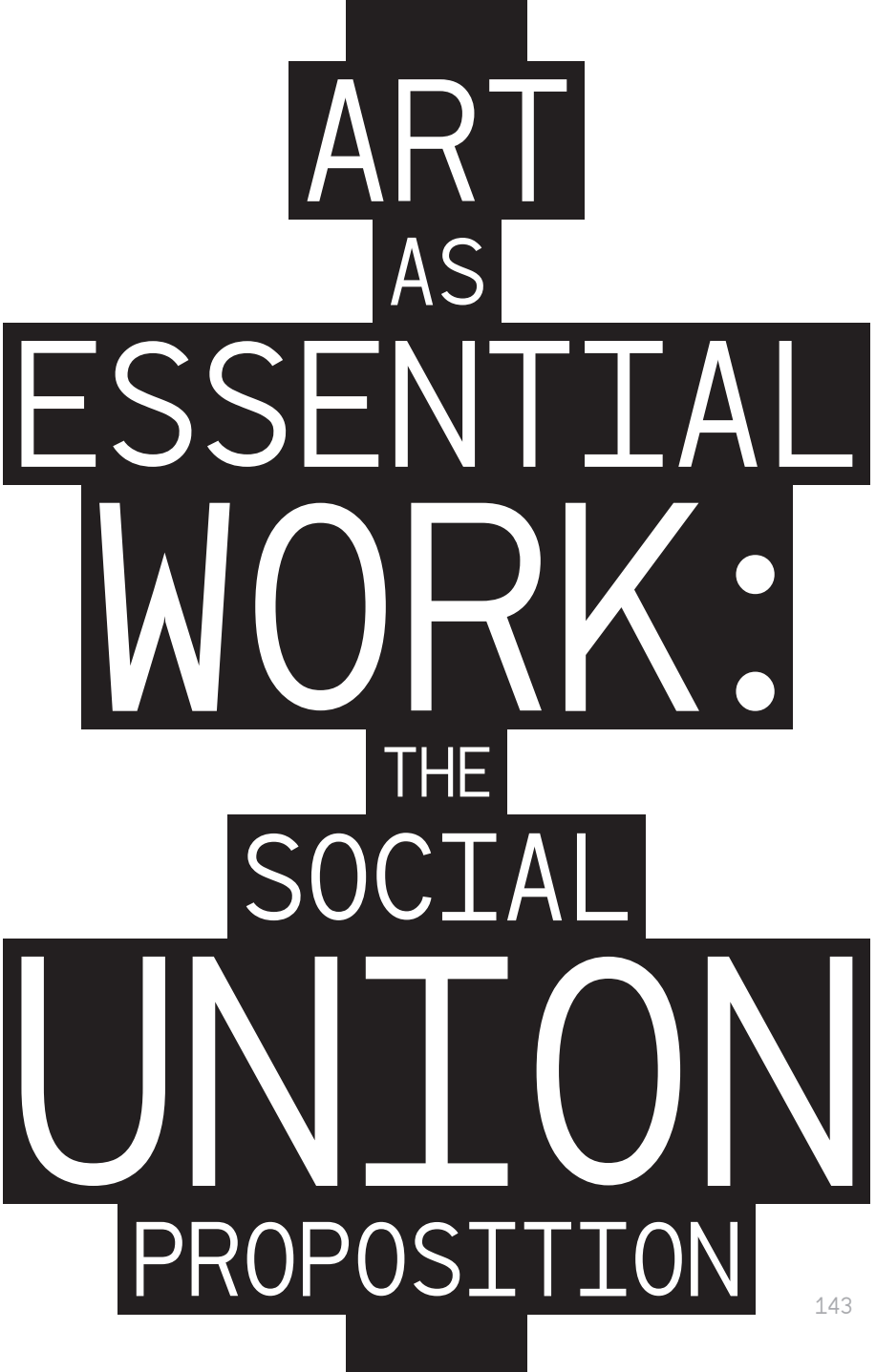
which art workers support the aggregation of cooperatives and community wealth building. Art of the people remains, in short, a beautiful riddle. Solving it, collectively, and in practice, may be the most important objective for art workers in the years to come.

"This chapter is adapted from Mia van den Bos, The Artist's Social Union: On Politically Organising Non-Productive Workers, master's thesis, Dutch Art Institute, ArtEZ University of the Arts, 2021."

HOW CAN UNIONS BECOME MORE RELEVANT IN ORGANISING AGAINST PRECARITY,

AND WHAT ROLE CAN ART WORKERS PLAY IN THIS?

WITH MIA VAN DEN BOS


ART
AS
ESSENTIAL
WORK:
THE
SOCIAL
UNION
PROPOSITION

For decades, unions in the world's most prosperous economies have been dwindling; losing members, lacking major achievements, and generally losing the fight against neoliberalism. Yet, in the turbulence of the global Covid pandemic, trade unionism began to recapture the imagination of left-leaning workers. In the US – for the first time in decades – workers of multinational companies such as Amazon and Starbucks formed new grassroots trade unions. Organisers gained momentum as the lockdowns made clear how society relied on the often unstable and underpaid work of `first responders' or `essential workers'. In the Netherlands, we witnessed large trade union-organised strikes by essential workers in transport and distribution centres, and the founding of a delivery riders' union that successfully contested the working conditions at food delivery companies.

FIGHT RACISM, NOT UNION BUSTING
UNION RIGHTS FOR ALL AMAZON WORKERS !
WORKERS ASSEMBLY AGAINST RACISM
UNION RIGHTS FOR ALL AMAZON WORKERS !
WORKERS ASSEMBLY AGAINST RACISM
UNION RIGHTS FOR ALL AMAZON WORKERS !
amazon UNION BUSTING IS DISGUSTING!
BEZOS' BILLIONS: STOLEN FROM WORKERS!
Amazon: RECOGNIZE the UNION NOW !
WORKERS ASSEMBLY AGAINST RACISM
ALU

Joe Piette, Amazon warehouse workers outside the National Labor Relations Board. Amazon warehouse workers in the U.S. formally established the Amazon Labor Union in 2022, despite the company's continuous union-busting efforts.

The uptick of unionisation campaigns also reached art workers, in institutions and beyond. Art workers formed trade unions at the New Museum, the Guggenheim New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, among others.[1] In several European countries, independent workers came together and organised, leading to the establishment of Art Workers Italia, the ZASUK art workers union in Slovenia, Za K.R.U.H. in Croatia, and, a few years later, the Art Workers Union MDPS in Lithuania and the Open Culture! platform and Culture Union in Slovakia. Most of these organising efforts preceded the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements by a few years, which often led to combined demands for social justice and better working conditions and gave the unions a sympathetic air of progressivism. This organising work was therefore received with appreciation on all levels of the art world – from the dirty floors of artists' studios all the way up to the shiny private jets of fatcat collectors. Art media took notice as well. In 2022, "Unions" took the third spot in *ArtReview*'s annual `Power 100'. According to the magazine, collective action and campaigns accelerated an irreversible "recognition of the *work* in artwork", changing the art world for the better, for good.[2]

1 Irish, `Museum Workers Are Tired of Being Paid in Cultural Cachet, So They're Unionizing', 2023.

2 Art Review, `Power 100', 2022, https://artreview.com/power-100/?year=2022. In the following years, it turned out that the appearance of Unions among the rich and famous of the art world was a one-off. The spotlights of glossy art magazines have moved on to the next big story, as they do. But the hopes that fueled the union surge live on.

Trade unions were the prime movers in winning concessions from capital and the building of social welfare states in the twentieth century, but what are the possibilities and limitations of the trade union model in the globalised context of contemporary art and financialised capital? In an economy increasingly reliant on

precarious, project-based labour, there is fertile ground for artists to organise alongside other self-employed workers to improve their shared working conditions and lives. But we are going to need all the strategic intelligence we can muster to organise art workers beyond 19th-century notions of the worker and the gatekeeping of `professionalism', whilst acknowledging the role of art in speculative accumulation, without glossing over the question of bargaining power or actually existing interest differences between professional groups. Our two cents, in this text, take the shape of two proposals: the art worker in the social union and the art worker as an investee activist.

In September of 2024, Slovakian cultural workers took to the streets of Bratislava as part of the nationwide Culture Strike by Open Culture!. They rallied around three simple demands: good governance, fair payment, and an end to political censorship. The team behind Open Culture! share more about their organisation, which also founded a cultural workers union,

in this interview: https://networkcultures.org/ourcreativereset/2025/01/15/the-slovak-culture-strike.

ARE CULTURAL WORKERS' UNIONS ONLY FOR PROFESSIONALS?

Sentiments and experiences around unionising art and cultural workers are strangely contradictory. The level of normalised exploitation makes the need for collective bargaining obvious. Lock three artists in a bar, give them a bottle of vodka, come back three hours later, and they will probably have founded a union, set up a collective, or organised a strike. At the same time, art workers find it notoriously hard to unionise within durational and disciplined structures. In the *ABC of the Projectariat*, Kuba Szreder describes this simultaneous enthusiasm and chaos encountered in art workers' unionising efforts:

> Sometimes, it is easier for [art workers] to go to an international conference on another continent than to attend a neighbourhood meeting. Anyone who has tried to organise a union of art workers, pull off an art strike or maintain a long-term struggle knows very well that these feats are as difficult as herding cats. On the other hand, a black cat is a symbol of wildcat strikes, often adopted by anarchist trade unions and collectives to underline their untamed yet ferocious character. In a similar fashion, when art workers assemble together, they have to learn the tough art of maintaining the struggle, despite their own tendencies and structural pressures.[3]

These "structural pressures" are key. While it is undeniably hard to organise art workers, this is not just because we are hopeless individualists, opportunists, or insular geniuses. It's because people who try to unionise

3 Szreder, *ABC of the Projectariat*, 2021.

face incredibly challenging conditions. How to collectivise, if we're all supposed to be micro-entrepreneurs? Who to negotiate with, if there is no clear employer? How to build long-term relations, if we all have to run from gig to gig? The reasons hindering art workers from unionising are, in short, systemic, becoming apparent once the initial outrage and enthusiasm of a unionisation initiative needs to be transformed into the hard, boring, technical, exhausting, persistent, and dirty work of long-haul organising. To better understand these systemic barriers, we have to take a closer look at the mode of production that art workers engage with.

4 Marx, *Capital*, 1976, p. 484. Leipzig was the centre of the German publishing and book trade in the nineteenth century.

5 Beech, *Art and Value*, 2016.

The mode of production of art differs from the capitalist mode of production. If art-making abided by the laws of capitalist production, art would be produced in workshops, in which all the painting supplies, printing presses, computers, and kilns were owned by a capitalist. Artists would sell their labour power to the capitalist in return for a wage. While the artworks produced would be sold on the art market by the capitalist, for more money than was spent on the labour and material costs involved in their production. If art was produced in this way, art-making would be considered `productive labour', as it would produce surplus value, which is the key feature of the capitalist mode of production. As Karl Marx explains in *Capital Volume I*:

> [John] Milton, who wrote *Paradise Lost*,
> was an unproductive worker. On the other hand,
> a writer who turns out work for his publisher
> in factory style is a productive worker.
> Milton produced *Paradise Lost* as a silkworm produces
> silk, as the activation of his own nature...
> But the literary proletarian of Leipzig who produces
> books, such as compendia on political economy,

> at the behest of his publisher is pretty nearly a productive worker since his production is taken over by capital and only occurs in order to increase it.[4]

The process of today's mode of production of art is similar to a pre-capitalist mode of production, that of patronage or the simple commodity production of hand-made goods sold by their maker. This is the explanation of something artists understand intuitively: that the way we work often speaks a different language to the economy that we exist within, and that it is very difficult to make a living from our practices. Making the position of artists even dicier, when a work is sold on the art market, the economic value of an artwork cannot be rationally assessed by calculating labour time and cost of materials. A quick sketch by a renowned artist can fetch millions of dollars, while a labouriously constructed sculpture by a recent graduate can sell for less than what was spent on producing it. It is due to this that artist and academic Dave Beech claims that art is priced independently of value, and is instead reliant on reputation.[5]

The market function of artistic labour is to encourage artists to see themselves as productive workers, so that they `invest' in their careers by amassing student debt, accepting unremunerated assignments and professional development opportunities, and ultimately continue to compete within the marketplace. In *Speculation as Mode of Production*, Marina Vishmidt analyses the precise assumptions behind this `speculative labour' in the arts. Art workers accept work without immediate compensation, hoping for future realisation, typically generated when their work increases in value as it is endorsed by institutions, collectors, and other market players. Art historian Angela Dimitrakaki claims in her text `What Is an Art Worker?' that "it is only out of competition among artists that some of them will eventually create capital. In this way, artists must continue to self-identify as economically active and compete en masse

in order to achieve `productive labour'."[6] It is thus in the interests of capital accumulation that artists view their work within the limits of the existing capitalist economy, despite the non-standard specificities of the industry.

6 Dimitrikaki, `What Is an Art Worker?', 2017.

It is also important to consider the macroeconomic changes of the last decades. In the context of a financialised economy, the capitalist market is itself less reliant on standard modes of production involving wage labour, meaning that an increasing number of workers are in a similar position to artists – an insecure position qua work, encouraged to seek credit in a system highly dependent on reputational politics. With the normalisation of `human capital' as the identification of the labour force, it has become increasingly normal to view unpaid work as investment in future opportunities, networking activities, and CV building, especially when it concerns early-career activities like internships. We see this trend particularly in the growth of the gig economy, such as Uber drivers, Fiverr freelancers, and food delivery couriers who rely on customer reviews and algorithmic monitoring to gain further work. Even if the studio artist and the latte artist have very different types of engagement with the aesthetic regimes, the economic logic of their (under)payment converges in the gig economy. Dimitrakaki suggests the use of classifying artists as workers for the neoliberal state, with the position of artists justifying why:

> a group of people cannot make a living despite participating in the economy. [...] The artist is interpellated as a worker upon recognition that unemployment and underemployment, casualisation, and so forth are trends of the job market overall, and that all workers should expect to be affected and to live out these trends.

Furthermore, the unrivaled late curator and theorist Marina Vishmidt has argued that beyond these commonalities with other precarised workers, artistic labour is even more

speculative and exploitable. There is, she argues, a close resemblance between the art market and the financial market, in that they are both driven by open-ended expansion and incorporation (anything can be art, as much as anything can be a speculative asset) as well as self-referential value statements (there is no use value or other material point of reference to determine the price of an artwork, nor is there any for financial capital). Once the bubble of speculation bursts, there is no base value to fall back on. Furthermore, only a few percent of all art school graduates ever make it beyond the phase that would be considered `early career' in other fields, meaning they can actually live off the sales of their art. Art work, in short, is speculative production on steroids.

Dimitrakaki asserts that the art worker is not necessarily a productive worker, since the work of most artists will never accrue market value. But art worker*s*, as a collective body, are, since their collective work accrues immense market value. Dimitrakaki therefore suggests that it is only in the "collective body of artists that the possibility of productive labor arises." This is why any demands made on behalf of artists must be done so collectively, on behalf of the artists who do sell work and receive opportunities, as well as those who don't. The capitalist economic base and art's non-capitalist mode of production are conditions that require organised solidarity across art workers, waged and unwaged, productive and unproductive, to delineate any power strong enough to make political and economic demands.

This position is less obvious, and more controversial than it might appear. When artists, curators, art writers, and others with creative-genius status unionise, they will often defend the structures that uphold their reputations as creative geniuses, since this reputation constitutes their livelihoods. For instance, artist unions and associations have a vested interest in the distinction between `professional' and `amateur' artists. Unions have

arguably inherited the gatekeeper function of medieval guilds to regulate the influx of labour and goods into the market and funnel money toward the `professional' side of the divide. In guarding the equilibrium of market access, unions can play a distinctly conservative role. For instance, many unions initially refused to represent freelance workers, because they were seen as entrepreneurs who merely disrupted established labour rights and relations. It is also worth remembering that Hollywood actor Ronald Reagan got his first taste of politics as a union leader of the Screen Actors Guild. While workers' power is fundamental, and unions are crucial in building it, cultural workers' unions are not inherently revolutionary.

7 Ross, *Communal Luxury*, 2016.

8 Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 2011.

9 Monroe, `Artists as Militant Trade Union Workers During the Great Depression', 1974.

Commitment to the anti-capitalist organising of art workers requires rejecting the individualist conceptions of professionalism, as well as its romantic version, the artist genius. This may require established union members to give up some exclusive privileges, or to share them with a broader group. While this is undoubtedly a lot to ask, there is ultimately more to gain. To understand how, we must take a step back and look at the bigger historical picture of art workers' organising.

A RADICAL HISTORY OF ARTIST ORGANISING

Contrary to the stereotype of artists as shameless individualists who are notoriously difficult to organise, artists have played crucial roles in the revolutionary movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Paris Commune, the socialist government that controlled the city for two months in 1871, contained a significant Artist's Federation among its revolutionaries. One of the main principles of the Artist's Federation Manifesto, which

was read aloud to a delegation of 400 artists during the Commune, was the "independence and dignity of every artist taken under the protection of all through the creation of a committee elected by the universal suffrage of artists."[7] After the Commune was crushed by the French National army, ten thousand of those convicted for their participation were artisans and design workers. Artists also played a decisive role in the 1917 October Revolution and its aftermath, with many Russian avant-garde artists, such as Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, and Alexander Rodchenko, occupying positions in the administration of the new Bolshevik state, creating arts policy and reorganising the art education and museum system.[8]

Protestors at a rally of the Artists Union in 1930s New York, captured by an anonymous photographer. The image was first published accompanying the article `National News of the Artists Union', Art Front, May, 1937.

In 1933 a group of radical artists and writers formed the Unemployed Artists Group (UAG) in New York City, later known as the Artists Union.[9] This group organised demonstrations and campaigned for local, state, and federal programmes to create work for artists during the economic crisis of the Great Depression. Less than a year later, the

government created the Public Works of Art project, a six-month work-relief project commissioning artists to create public artworks, later expanded into the Federal Arts Project. From then on, the Artists Union's main objective became to make permanent and expand publicly subsidised work for artists. The Artists Union became the "de facto bargaining agent" for the thousands of artists employed by the Federal Arts Project. When the programmes began to be curtailed at the end of 1936 and mass layoffs were expected, the Artists Union fought vigorously to retain their jobs, believing that government-subsidised wage labour was the key to economic and creative freedom for artists. As they stated in their manifesto:

> The State can eliminate once and for all the unfortunate dependence of American artists upon the caprice of private patronage.

The Netherlands is one of the few countries that retained a government-funded social policy for artists throughout much of the twentieth century, namely the Visual Artists Scheme / Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling. Building up the welfare state in the decades after WWII, the Dutch government introduced general health care, welfare for the unemployed, the state pension for the elderly, scholarships for students, as well as support schemes for artists. The Visual Artists Scheme existed in some form from 1949 to 1987 and provided a social safety net for artists in the form of a basic income in return for works of art once or twice a year. Substantial pressure for collective social provisions for artists had come from the Professional Association of Visual Artists (BBK), which formed in Amsterdam in May 1945 from artists' groups involved in resistance movements during the German Occupation of the Netherlands, including the Socialist Artists' Circle, Union of Artists for the Defence of Culture, and the Committee for Artists and Intellectuals. In total, over 5,700 artists were supported by the BKR scheme, but not without a fight. Throughout its existence, the scheme was criticised

for being too expensive, and the Dutch municipalities ran into practical issues storing their growing collection of `donated' works. The BBK was crucial in the defense of the Visual Artists Scheme against these critiques, leading the opposition against proposed cutbacks; their protest actions included weeks-long occupations of the Rijksmuseum in front of Rembrandt's *The Night Watch*. Despite their resistance, the Visual Artist's Scheme was made more restrictive in 1972 and eventually cut under the government of Ruud Lubbers, as a part of his neoliberal restructuring of the Netherlands through his `Grote Operaties', and was finally terminated in 1987.

Rob Mieremet, BBK bezet Nachtwachtzaal in Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam tegen falend cultuurbeleid, 1969. Members of the Dutch Visual Artists Association (BBK) occupied the Night Watch room of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam for weeks.

Interestingly, the calls for tough but necessary cuts, `realism', and entrepreneurship that accompanied neoliberal

policy in arts and culture became increasingly prevalent even within the institutional art world.[10] It was felt that the ideological structure supporting the BKR, a combination of social income policy, the conception of art as a public good, and the Enlightenment idea that art elevates the people, was no longer tenable under the changing political climate. As discussed in more detail in the chapter *Payment for Art Work,* Third Way politics and austerity appeared as a reasonable, and even attractive alternative to a stuck-in-place subsidy system. But the effects of this ideological shift can still be felt today. The Dutch cultural workers' union Kunstenbond operates effectively, but the state-sanctioned trade union model means working within an ever-shrinking space dictated by legal and political limitations of capitalist realism. An example is the Kunstenbond's provision of services catered to the individual professional artist. Instead of a collective labour agreement that would represent all visual artists, they offer a range of insurance packages and a web series on finding the balance between being an artist and entrepreneur.

10 Many of the `insider' critiques on the BKR can be found in Ter Braak and De Neef, eds. *Second Opinion*, 2007.

While the Visual Arts Scheme has become an object of collective nostalgia in the Dutch arts, the example of Belgium shows how things can be different. To this day, Belgian art workers in possession of an `art worker proof' receive income support from the government, providing an (admittedly exclusive) safety net and seriously diminishing the need for competition between individual workers. As discussed in the chapter *Payment for Art Work*, workers' organisations SOTA and Jubilee have played a crucial role in creating and maintaining this policy. While it is hard to pinpoint the exact correlation between political attitudes and government policy, it is at least remarkable that art workers in Belgium rallied around the slogan `Kunst = solidair' (Art = Solidarity) when protesting against budget cuts from the right-wing government in

culture, education, and healthcare in 2019-2020. Our Belgian comrades have managed to fend off neoliberal policy *and* ideology much better than the Dutch did, under similar economic conditions.

Art workers in Brussels, marching with the slogan `Art = Solidarity', at a protest organised by State of the Arts in 2020. Captured by an anonymous photographer and circulated on social media.

In these examples from 150 years of art workers' organising, we can see the world-building capacity of artists, not just in the symbolic realm of their work, but in real-world political organising. Artists' groups have faced similar problems throughout this period, including precarious work and hostile government policies, and expressed themselves in the language of solidarity, with the understanding that artists require a level of collectively organised support to make their work. On the other hand, we have to remain careful, because the desire to get things done pragmatically can leave our organisations vulnerable to co-optation and division.

TRADE UNIONISM, SOCIAL UNIONISM, AND ARTISTS

In the nineteen-eighties, neoliberal politicians had a key objective to crush the power of trade unions in order for their deindustrialisation and labour deregulation

policies to be implemented. Labour unions were fiscally encouraged to release their militant stance as the site of working-class bargaining power and instead provide educational and motivational programmes to encourage their members' lifelong employability. This led to a significant shift in the scope of union work to that of service provision, for example, providing business or legal advice, professional development opportunities, or insurance packages, which has come to eclipse the representative and regulatory roles of trade unions. In order to rebuild a union movement capable of making demands, socialist writer Shaun May proposes a shift in focus to the life of the working class and not simply the workplace, which he terms the `social union'.[11] A social union pivots away from exclusively representing the interests of the increasingly dwindling section of the working class who are in full-time stable employment, and instead focuses on representing the interests of the class as a whole, including casual, freelance, precarious, and unemployed workers and broadening the scope of struggle to outside the workplace, such as welfare, housing, and healthcare. The structure of the social union would initially be based on a coalition of different trade unions, organisations, and campaigns, supporting each other and coalescing around mutual demands.

To visualise the idea of a social union, it is instructive to look at the pioneering social movement unionism of the New South Wales Builders Labourers' Federation (NSW BLF), active in nineteen-seventies Australia. The NSW BLF used their muscle as a union in a key productive industry to work in solidarity with resident, student, and activist groups on a range of issues, from protecting the environment, heritage sites, and public housing from developers in the famous Green Ban strikes, to standing alongside oppressed social groups. In *Green Bans, Red Union*, Meredith and Verity Burgmann recount how in 1972 the NSW BLF was contacted by Aboriginal rights activists to alert them to the planned demolition of `unoccupied' houses being squatted by

Aboriginal people in the working-class suburb of Redfern.[12] The houses had been purchased by a developer who wanted to knock them down to build lucrative townhouses. The NSW BLF responded by placing an immediate ban on the development. Without the labour power to complete the project and facing resistance from local Aboriginal rights groups, the developers' hands were tied, and they sold the houses to the government for the creation of the Redfern Aboriginal Community Housing Scheme. In another solidarity action, the union worked with students to halt the construction of a new lecture theatre at Macquarie University over the expulsion of a gay student, and as a result, his expulsion was rescinded. These examples show what can be achieved when movements transcend the distinction between organised labour and social justice activism, and coalesce in one which engages everyone on the receiving end of capitalism's destructive drive, those employed in productive labour and those not. However, these examples also demonstrate the necessity of having bargaining power on our side, signalling that organised productive labour must be part of the equation within a social union.

11 May, *Capital-in-crisis*, 2017.

12 Burgmann and Burgmann, *Green Bans, Red Union*, 2017.

Since, as we observed, the building of organised art workers' power strong enough to make political and economic demands requires solidarity across art workers, waged and unwaged, productive and unproductive, the proposal of the social union seems to be particularly compelling in their case. However, the social union proposition takes the notion of general working class interest further than any `reasonable' proposal within the trade union paradigm. The historical examples and present-day trade unions discussed above concerned art workers organising primarily in response to their own working conditions, sometimes bridging the differences between high- and low-earning artists. The perspective of social unionism rather posits artists side by side with *all* other workers, givers, and receivers of care,

and tenants. This leads to two important questions: How can artists fulfil a productive role in the social union? And what do artists stand to gain from the social union, more than from a traditional trade union?

13 Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*, 2021.

14 d'Alancaisez, `Art in Solidarity with Itself', 2021.

The former question might be the trickiest, because pledges of `solidarity' in art easily gloss over diverging group and class interests. Many art workers hold solidarity as a genuine central concern in their practices, as is evidenced by the wave of socially engaged art. But it is also pretty common for art workers to profess a kind of uninvited, superficial solidarity that is mainly aimed at increasing their own status – something Catherine Liu calls `virtue hoarding'.[13] In the essay `Art in Solidarity with Itself', Pierre d'Alancaisez, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, made the uncomfortably sharp observation that art tends to suck the social and cultural capital out of any social movement it engages with, sometimes regardless of the best of intentions.[14] What we should really be asking then is: who stands to benefit from the solidarity, the cause, or the art world? To play a constructive role in the social union, artists can recognise the social and economic interests they share with the working and precarious classes and positively contribute to class struggle. Especially if we acknowledge art's tendency to absorb cultural capital, reaching a good balance within the social union may feel like art taking a subservient role.

A good example of what a collaboration like this can look like is the work that artist Matthijs de Bruijne has done with the FNV Cleaners' Union in the Netherlands. In 2010, De Bruijne was invited by the union to collaborate with the cleaners to create a visual identity for their campaigns, with a focus on rebuilding the historic connection between the labour movement and art and culture. A significant number of cleaners are self-employed or work through temporary employment agencies, so there are parallels to be drawn with

the arts and the possibility of shared tactics and mutual solidarity. The Cleaners' union held 3 major strikes in 2010, 2012, and 2014, with the 2010 strike being the longest in the Netherlands since 1933. The strikes succeeded in achieving a wage increase of 4.85 per cent (while inflation was close to zero), regular workload assessments, more security for temporary workers, and paid sick days. Their successes cannot be solely attributed to their visual campaigns, but when looking back at the media attention the campaigns received and the public interest they garnered, there was a definite impact achieved through their collaboration with an artist to create a compelling visual narrative for their struggle. This is a great example of an artist working to their strengths in solidarity with another group of precarious workers. It shows that skill, craftsmanship, intelligence, and experience can be appreciated and valued beyond the benchmarks of professionalism. De Bruijne was not invited because he was a qualified professional artist, but because his practice could meaningfully contribute to the struggle.

Members of the FNV Cleaners' Union marching at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport with campaign materials made by Matthijs De Bruijne.

15 Iranian-Australian poet and academic Ali Alizadeh has used Marx's writings to create an argument for art's intrinsic use-value. Alizadeh describes art's intrinsic value as the production of un-estranging mental and intellectual use value which serves to remedy the alienation we experience due to various overwhelming externalities, such as ideology, religion, and nature.

16 Martin and Quick, *Unions Renewed*, 2020.

Another inspiring example is *The World after Amazon*, a collection of sci-fi short stories by rank-and-file Amazon workers imagining the world beyond Amazon. In this project, initiated by The ReImagining Value Action Lab (RiVAL) in Canada, 13 Amazon workers were invited "to tell their own stories, dream their own dreams, and reclaim the collective power to shape the future, in solidarity with the workers and communities around the world that are rising up to challenge Amazon." While the Amazon workers wrote science fiction, career writers supported them with coaching, and academics used their skills and networks to organise, coordinate, produce, and publish the book, and to raise the funds needed to pay everyone involved in the project. In this way, academics, writers, and rank-and-file Amazon workers stood side by side, each indispensable in their unique way. Even if this project sprang from academia, a field that in its own right is extractive in its engagement with workers, *The World after Amazon* is clearly more productive than extractive; a good rule of thumb to evaluate socially engaged cultural projects in general. In the social union, this kind of collaboration should be cultivated and supported.

This leaves us with the question of what benefit artists may expect from engagement in the social union. In the social union, art is not valued for its exceptional status, but for its social and political value, as well as art's intrinsic use value for its maker(s), which gives form to the human need to create and see ourselves reflected in the world.[15] Giving up their culturally privileged position might

feel scary to art workers, but in the end, as much as any other precarised worker, art workers stand to gain from collective action for affordable housing, public childcare, better labour rights for freelancers, and the power to imagine political change. Moreover, the political power of such social needs organising was proven by the Bernie Sanders campaign in 2016, which was grass-roots organised, focused on access to food, housing, and healthcare, and had a major impact on the political landscape. Our job, as art workers, is to align art and culture with these basic needs. Yes, it is bread we fight for, but we fight for roses, too.

INVESTEE ACTIVISM

With the source of economic growth and capital investment being increasingly fixed in financial markets, union strategies such as the ability to wage-bargain and the threat of withholding of labour through strikes decrease in effectiveness. Writers Alice Martin and Annie Quick argue that the union movement is essential to rebuilding the power of workers, but that new tactics are required in the age of financial capitalism.[16] Potential strategies include mobilising the `whole bargaining unit', meaning engaging subcontracted and outsourced workers, leveraging shareholder power through reputational sabotage, and collectively utilising the power of withholding payments to finance capital, such as debt strikes and rent strikes. Michel Feher, in his book *Rated Agency: Investee Politics in a Speculative Age,* terms these strategies `investee activism', stating that:

> today's activists will have to inhabit their condition as investees in such a way as to match their opponents' skills in the art of speculation. In short, investee activism must be about altering the conditions of accreditation. This means fostering the appreciation of alternative projects, both by promoting different evaluative criteria

> and by working to discredit the type
> of endeavours that financial capitalists
> are spontaneously inclined to appreciate.[17]

The potentials of combined investee activism could be rich in the arts, taking forms in the domains of art institutions, education, housing, and gentrification, or the art market. Notable examples of successful artist-led movements which have leveraged their reputation against art institutions include the boycott of the 2014 Biennale of Sydney due to its major funding by offshore refugee detention centre contractor Transfield and the campaign and boycott of the 2019 Whitney Biennial against board member Warren Kanders, owner of Safariland, a manufacturer of tear-gas used by law enforcement agencies against protestors in the US.[18]

17 Peher, *Rated Agency*, 2018.

18 Lentin and de Costa, `Sydney Biennale Boycott Shows that Divestment Works', 2014, and Small, `As Artists Withdraw From the Whitney Biennial Over Kanders Controversy, Others Refuse the Call to Boycott', 2019.

In art education, this could look like a collective of art students' tuition fee striking or collectively refusing to make student debt payments in order to change policy or in solidarity with their tutors' demand for secure and better-paying contracts. An example of recent student social unionism has been the student and staff-organised university protest actions and encampments in solidarity with Palestine, which demanded ties be broken with Israel. The Koninklijke Academie van Beeldende Kunsten (KABK) student union succeeded in getting their demand met for the KABK to break ties with Bezalel Art University in Jerusalem. This achievement demonstrates the power of organised students to force the hand of institutions and shape political narratives that reach far outside of campus politics.

In terms of housing, artists and galleries have a well-documented complicity in the process of gentrification.

They are parachuted into `underdeveloped' neighbourhoods by property developers and city planners to create a cultural atmosphere that will attract the interest of investors and rich new inhabitants. After some years, rents and property prices rise, and the artists have to move on – along with other less affluent inhabitants of the neighbourhood. However, art workers can use their skills and positions differently. In their quest for (mostly temporary) studio spaces and affordable places to live, many experienced artists have developed skills in negotiating with property owners and local governments, and know which organisations and unions can support them. They can therefore mobilise as crucial allies in the struggles over affordable housing. Their everyday skills are easy to share and instrumental in turning collective action into victories, for art workers as well as their neighbours. To this end, the Rotterdam-based collective Cultural Workers Unite developed the Anti-Gentrification School, teaching art workers how to resist becoming a tool of gentrification and instead fight for collective housing rights. A good example of the things they can achieve is the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement in Los Angeles, a coalition of tenants' unions and artist groups that agitate to have galleries leave Boyle Heights to prevent gentrification and retain the cultural and class composition of the area.

The foremost mode of speculation art workers are invested in is, of course, the art market. This includes artists, who directly benefit from the speculative increase of value in artworks, but also others whose labour is valued because it increases the speculative value of art, such as art writers, curators, and even institutional workers – since, if the existing value chains of art collapse, so do the institutional positions of these art workers. Many art workers have tried, and continue trying to opt out of this exploitative speculation. This might result in (short-lived) unionisation initiatives, strikes, self-organising efforts, self-instrumentalisation of art work for social struggles,

refusals to be `professional', or pledges to no longer make anything commodifiable. However, oftentimes, these opt-outs are met with critique or scepticism. For instance, when the Yugoslav artist Goran Djordjević sent out a call for an International Strike of Artists in 1979, he found extremely low strike morale among his peers. Henryk Gajewski said he had "no time for [an] artists' strike", Mel Ramsden professed not to have "the financial flexibility to boycott the art system", and Carl Andre was all-round cynical about the idea: "From whom would artists be withholding their art if they went on strike? Alas, from no one but themselves."[19] As a result of this generalised skepticism, individual strikers may feel like lonely losers, like the only thing they can achieve is harming their own interests.

19 A large amount of source materials and a great analysis of Djordjević's International Strike of Artists can be found in Praznik, *Art Work,* pp. 76-91.

However, when we understand artists as investees in the speculative production of value, and opting out as a form of investee activism, we can see that we don't have to be cynical. On the contrary, opting out of art workers' default investment in the speculation of future value accumulation on the art market is a radical act of solidarity, which can be used to target auction houses, galleries, and art fairs. Also, control over the speculative value of art can be used as bargaining power against the public institutions benefiting from it. One group of people that is particularly good at this kind of value leveraging is The Office for Postartistic Services in Poland. They emerged during the nationalist authoritarian PiS government between 2015 and 2023, and used the deliberately ambiguous notion of `postart' to organise a Strike of Paintings, develop a new anti-fascist flag, and organise a March for Hospitality in support of migrants, among many other amazing projects.[20] They show that opting out of the value chain of the art market does not mean giving up or losing, but, contrarily, claiming the power to redirect the speculative value of art.

For Your Freedom and Ours, 11 November 2021, photographed by Rafał Milach. With their March for Hospitality, as part of the annual antifascist party in Warsaw, members of The Office for Postartistic Services turned silver and golden heat blankets into flags, introducing a widely adopted symbol of solidarity with refugees.

20 Read more about the notion of `postartistic practice' and the scene organised around it in Eckenhaussen, `The Swamps of Postart', 2024.

These are just some of the shapes that an artist's political organising can look like. To seriously fight precarisation and improve the working lives of artists, it is essential that art workers make their voices heard in the network of organisations, collectives, and unions that, in time, could become a movement, a social union, strong enough to make transformational demands that could improve the lives of both artists and the broader precariously employed working class. The idea of a social union broadens a union's scope outside of the workplace to

broader struggles of the precarious working class. The principle of investee activism adds a coherent perspective on the relationship between the debt economy, financial speculation, and the reputational politics that dominate our working and non-working lives. Together, these ideas provide a renewed framework with which to reconsider the future of working-class struggle and ultimately, what constitutes liberation.

WE’RE ALL
ANGRY
AND
DISAPPOINTED,

BUT IS
BURNING DOWN
THE MUSEUM
THE WAY
TO GO?

IF NOT,
WHAT’S
THE ALTERNATIVE?

ARE MUSEUMS POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS? FROM INSTITUTIONAL NIHILISM TO INFRASTRUCTURAL CRITIQUE

"Eyes on the prize: the ultimate target is the infrastructure of global capitalism."
Manuela Zammit and Alina Lupu, *Institutional Critique Is Not Enough*

Talking about art, heritage, and social justice today, it seems impossible to ignore the defeat of social justice as a political discourse by the so-called `anti-woke' rhetoric of the right.[1] The proof of this defeat is the surprising degree to which anti-wokeness has recently been adopted on the left. We do not have to look across the Atlantic Ocean to see that this development is as crippling to the public function of art as it is to legal systems and media. Art institutions throughout Europe proactively self-censor politically sensitive programs, anticipating political backlash and defunding. Diversity, inclusion, and social justice are out; neutrality and `countering polarisation' are in. Among art workers, this development feeds into a growing sense of what I would call institutional nihilism.

This sentiment comes in at least two flavours. First, it is evident in the recent popularity of cultural abolitionism, which holds that art institutions are integrally part of the colonial project and should be gradually or immediately abolished.[2] Sometimes, cultural abolitionism is careful and nuanced. Max Haiven argues that once "a massive, relatively peaceful economic shift" has happened, we will probably find that galleries, museums, and other art institutions are not the "best vehicles for supporting, elevating, celebrating, and enjoying the greatest cultural and creative achievements of our species [...] and will need to be abolished as such."[3] Yet often cultural abolitionism is more insistent. As members of the abolitionist art collective Red Forest stated during the conference *MetaForumX – PermaCrises*: "The only thing we can do is to

destroy every single institution we have. As long as we keep on thinking as institutions, and try to give ourselves the Law – whereby we harbour the kind of bourgeois liberalism that is the problem – the crisis will always be there. And we are it."[4] To echo Harney and Moten's famous phrase in *The Undercommons,* the abolitionist attitude is to be "within and against".[5] The only types of institutional engagement consistent with this attitude are boycott, protest, theft, and Trojan Horse tactics.

1 This text is a reworked version of a short lecture I gave at the conference *Reframing the Present: Contemporary Art, Cultural Heritage, and Social Justice*, organised by Francesca Pola, Diletta Caimmi and Lisa Sanguineti. The conference was hosted at the beautiful Palazzo Borromeo in Caseno Maderno in September 2025.

2 Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 2022.

3 Haiven, `No Artist Left Alive', 2020.

4 Red Forest in conversation with Szabolcs, 2024.

5 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 2013.

6 Davis in conversation with Citarella, `The New Style of Artist Career', 2024.

The second flavour of institutional nihilism is the conviction that legacy art institutions are simply outdated. It stems from the growing belief that museums are incapable of sensing relevance and urgency amid platform capitalism and information overload. In a podcast interview with artist Joshua Citeralla, I recently heard Artnet staff critic Ben Davis coin the term `post-institutional art'.[6] Davis hypothesises that post-internet artists like Citarella are trailblazing a new style of artist career. Facing the decline of public institutions (or `the public' in general) and the ubiquity of social media, these artists have initiated a pivot from artist to content creator, making pay-walled video essays, newsletters, and podcasts. They market their Discord servers as online clubhouses that replace the meatspace underground scene as well as traditional learning institutions. `Post-institutional art' might not appear as a desire – both Davis and Citarella

have, in fact, defended institutions – but it is posited as the near-inevitable endgame of the ongoing privatisation drive.[7] The museum era, allegedly, is over.

7 If you're interested in what this endgame might look like in practice, read the brilliant introduction to Davis' *Art in the After-Culture.*

8 Not Surprised Collective, `Stedelijk Museum Fails to Loan Artwork by Ahmet Öğüt to Protect Students in Amsterdam', 2024.

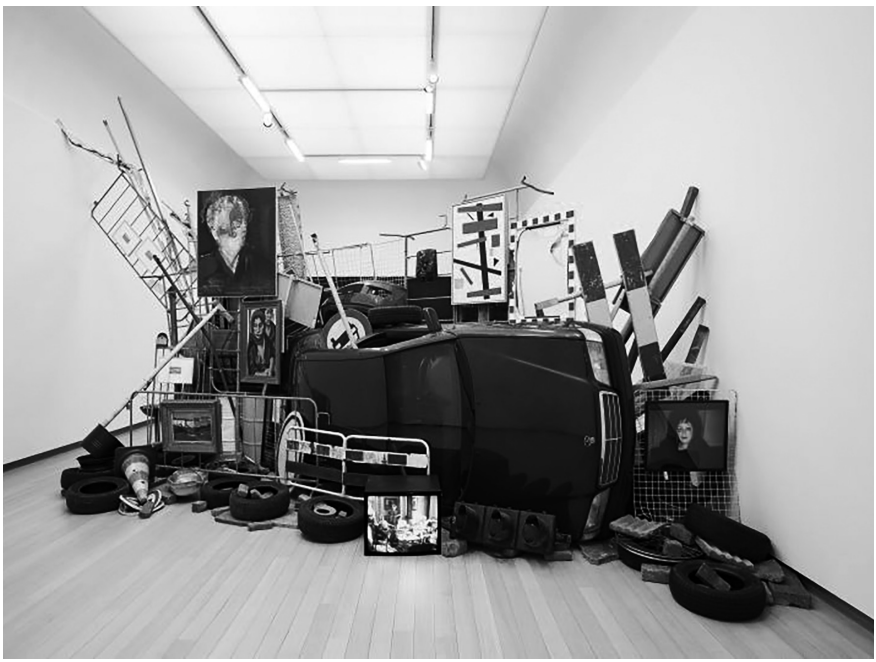
9 See: https://ahmetogut.com/Bakunin-s-Barricade.

The rise of institutional nihilism raises the question: Is it time to give up on the dream of art institutions as emancipatory, critical, public entities? Are we better off without museums altogether? Milling over these questions in my head, I kept returning to two stories regarding Free Palestine support in Dutch museums. The first is a direct experience I had, involving a failed loan request for the artwork *Bakunin's Barricade* from the Stedelijk Museum. It perfectly shows just about everything wrong with the empty, declarative politics of contemporary art museums. The second is one of a Picasso painting that travelled from Eindhoven to Ramallah. I encountered this example as a university student, and it stuck with me throughout the years as a tale of joyful resistance. As a hopeful antidote, it offers an alternative to institutional nihilism. Sharing and comparing these stories, I hope to tease out some insights into the political agency of art institutions and the future of museums.

BAKUNIN'S BARRICADE

In 2020, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam acquired the artwork *Bakunin's Barricade* (2015-2022) by artist Ahmet Öğüt.[8] The work is a barricade made up of one or more car wrecks, fences, traffic signs, rubble, and around eight original and, most importantly, valuable artworks from the exhibiting museum's collection. The concept is based on a myth about the revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. In 1849, when Prussian troops tried to defeat the socialist

insurgency in Dresden, Bakunin allegedly proposed to place paintings from the National Museum's collection in front of the barricades, speculating that Prussian soldiers wouldn't dare destroy the works and therefore would not pass the barricade. The proposal was never executed, but it survived as a thought experiment. Bringing the concept into the contemporary art museum, Öğüt hoped to raise questions about the value of art in times of sociopolitical change: "Should valuable artworks be used to defend democratic values? To whom do artworks in public collections belong? What cultural heritage should be preserved – and who decides?"[9]



Installation view of Ahmet Öğüt, *Bakunin's Barricade (2015-2022)*, at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. Photo: Gert Jan de Rooij.

As part of the ownership transfer, Öğüt and the Stedelijk Museum signed a contract, which was exhibited alongside the barricade and in which the museum agreed:

to loan the Barricade to the Public
in the Netherlands in order to be used as a barricade
if these parties request this loan in the
context of extreme economic, social, political,
transformative moments and movements
which engender high levels of public concern
relating to fundamental human rights,
including those defined in the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Three years after the purchase, in October 2023, such a transformative moment appeared, with the largest and most well-documented crime against humanity of the 21st century carried out by the Israeli Defence Force against the Palestinian people in Gaza and the West Bank. Protesting against the genocide and the lack of action from Western governments and institutions, students of the University of Amsterdam had set up a protest camp on university premises and faced police violence and eviction. This risk presented a sudden, real need for functional barricades in Amsterdam.

An impromptu collective of Amsterdam-based cultural workers, artists, and activists submitted a request to the Stedelijk Museum to loan *Bakunin's Barricade.* (Alongside Alina Lupu, Emin Batman, Esmee Schoutens, Jeftha Pattikawa, Juha van `t Zelfde, Macarena Loma Yevenes, Maren Siebert, Mitchell Esajas, Pieter Paul Pothoven, Raul Balai, Rowan Stol, and Stephanie van Gemert. I was also a member of this collective.) In the spirit of Bakunin's proposal, we wanted to use our collective property to protect protesting students and, by extension, the global movement for Palestinian liberation. We also wanted to pressure the Stedelijk to speak out against the genocide after more than half a year of institutional silence. The museum had actively supported the Black Lives Matter movement and Ukraine in the Ukraine-Russia war, but looked away from the crimes in Palestine for fear of backlash, as an extreme-right government coalition was in the making at the same time.

The museum director, Rein Wolfs, invited us for a conversation but refused to install *Bakunin's Barricade* at student encampments that had previously endured police violence. Instead, he proposed to set it up at the encampment of the Gerrit Rietveld Academy, which was unlikely to be evicted with violence. He also invoked a clause in the contract which allows for the use of replicas of original artworks from the Stedelijk's collection. The public, Wolfs emphasised, would not be made aware that the works were mere replicas. In other words, the museum director proposed to forge artworks from his own collection and display them publicly. It became painfully apparent that the declarative social justice politics of *Bakunin's Barricade* suited the museum's interests but that it was never the intention to actually put the work into action. Moreover, by agreeing to add the forgery clause to the contract, undermining the whole point of Bakunin's proposal, the artist showed that this had been a prize he was prepared to pay for the institutionalisation of his work. To our collective, this aestheticisation of politics was not acceptable, and we rejected the proposal. After that, statements were issued from all sides, and art media made a bit of a fuss, but, materially, nothing changed. *Bakunin's Barricade* became a monument to missed opportunities.

10 Visser, `Cultureel Nederland en België Boycotten Israël', 2025.

In the following months, the Stedelijk Museum changed its policies and retroactively retracted its public support for BLM and Ukraine, assuming a firmly `neutral' stance. This was still the museum's official position when, on the 3rd of October 2025, after almost two full years of genocide, over 300 Dutch and Belgian cultural institutions and thousands of cultural workers declared a boycott of Israel. The Stedelijk Museum decided not to participate, because, as a press officer explained, "We decided not to talk about war and political conflict a while ago. We don't see a role for our museum in these matters. We also don't want to play a role in the process of polarisation."[10]

STATEMENT STEDELIJK FOLLOWING LOAN REQUEST

The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam has published a brief on its website concerning a recent request by an activist group to borrow Ahmet Öğüt's assemblage sculpture

Stedelijk Museum Fails to Loan Artwork by Ahmet Öğüt to Protect Students in Amsterdam

Art Collective Rebukes Stedelijk Museum for 'Failure' Over Barricade Loan Standoff

Il Collettivo artistico Not Surprised critica lo Stedelijk Museum di Amsterdam per il mancato prestito dell'installazione "Bakunin's Barricade"

Updated Public Statement

In my previous statement, I outlined several key points about Bakunin's Barricade.

However, given recent developments, I feel the need to clarify a few additional points:

Artist demands Stedelijk Museum remove his work amid row over 'refused' loan request

HOW THE STEDELIJK MUSEUM AMSTERDAM REFUSED TO LET 'BAKUNIN'S BARRICADE' BE AN ACTUAL BARRICADE AGAINST THE ONGOING GENOCIDE.

ssay was originally published on ·Mister Motley on 30 December 2024·.

21 Mar 2025
18:00 - 20:00

Bakunin's Barricade: Answered

This is a small selection of screenshots from all the media coverage of the Bakunin's Barricade loan request and its aftermath, ordered chronologically. Sources include art media websites, newspapers, and art institutions, and the screenshots were taken by yours truly.

Even if we were to assume that neutrality is possible, this stance is remarkable. Because why would a museum that is so insistently holding on to political neutrality ever buy an explicitly politically engaged artwork like *Bakunin's Barricade*? And what has happened in the few years since the acquisition? Did they make a genuine political 180? Given the institution's size, its dependence on international art world cred, its situatedness in a progressive city, and its big team of people who have worked there for many years, I doubt that such a sharp political turnaround would be possible. A more compelling explanation, in my view, is that the purchase of *Bakunin's Barricade* was an act of declarative politics, which looked good to the outside but never held any substance. I see it as a prime example of outwardly critical exhibitions or programmes that are, in fact, rescue operations for the institution designed to rejuvenate the museum's collection and canon, reaffirm its position as the guardian of art history, and give it the *appearance* of social engagement.[11] Philosopher Olúfémi O. Táíwò has a great term for this kind of tragedy: `elite capture'. "Elite capture happens when the advantaged few steer resources and institutions that could serve the many toward their own narrower interests and aims".[12] The fact that the Stedelijk Museum now disavows values it previously pretended to embrace is not a turnaround, but an indication that the interests of the advantaged few controlling the institution have shifted under political pressure. Pretending that their narrow interests coincide with allegedly `polarising' stances, such as opposition to genocide, no longer suits the museum leadership. It is much more opportune today to adhere to a more traditional conception of museal duties focused on the careful preservation of collected works and the making of blockbuster exhibitions.

11 I discussed this at more length in Eckenhaussen, `Review of Karen Archey's `After Institutions'', 2024.

This reality feeds anger. Every time art workers try to turn institutions into sites of political action, and

every time these institutions refuse or co-opt, frustration and disappointment grow. But along with frustration, a sense of unavoidability also increases. Could we really expect museums to resist the rise of authoritarianism? We may call to mind that already in 2006, Hito Steyerl wrote: "Isn't it pretty absurd to argue that something like [an institution of critique exists], at a time when critical cultural institutions are clearly being dismantled, underfunded, and subjected to the demands of a neoliberal event economy?"[13] As we descend from neoliberalism into whatever cataclysmic mess we're in, it is no wonder that people start to ask what we need museums for in the first place. And yet, museums may have more political usefulness for the left than we grant them.

12 Táíwò, *Elite Capture*, 2022, p. 22.

13 Steyerl, `The Institution of Critique', 2006.

PICASSO IN PALESTINE

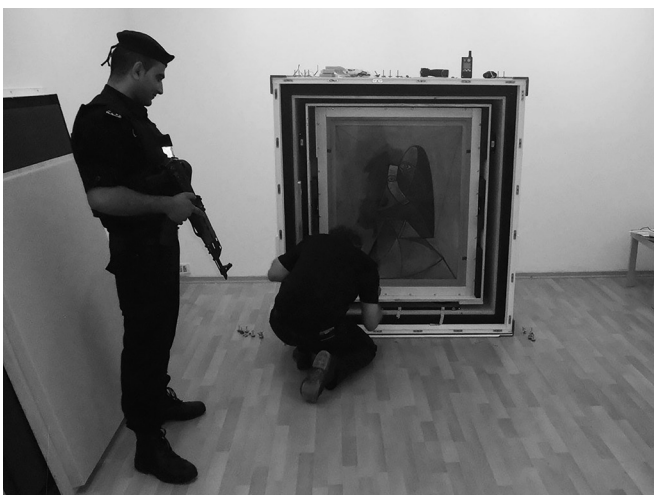
Pablo Picasso, *Buste de Femme*, 1943.

Dutch art institutions can support and have supported the Palestinian people's right to freedom and self-determination. I would like to take you back to 2011 for a moment – perhaps not to the most recent, but arguably the best example for our purposes. That year, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and the International Art Academy Palestine in Ramallah co-produced *Picasso in Palestine*. The artistic project's premise was simple: Khaled Hourani, an artist and the director of the Palestinian art academy, invited the Van Abbemuseum to bring its 1943 cubist painting *Buste de Femme* to Ramallah to be exhibited to the general public.

Buste de Femme on the road, followed by a media crew.

Reality was less simple. Due to the extensive security precautions and negotiations, and the legal and administrative restructuring required, a loan that would have normally taken a few weeks to arrange took two years. The museum had a difficult time insuring the artwork with an insurance value of about 1 million euros for its journey

into a country not recognised under Dutch law. It was equally difficult to find a transport company that would take on this gig, especially given the curatorial decision that the artwork would have to travel the same route an individual would take, including the many slow, intrusive, Kafka-esque checkpoints. At some points during the journey, the minivan with the artwork and its handlers was protected only by the cultural and monetary value of *Buste de Femme* – amplified by live media coverage. Moreover, for the painting to be exhibited in accordance with the Van Abbemuseum's conservation standards, a climate-controlled white cube had to be constructed in Ramallah. When *Buste the Femme* finally arrived, it was the first face-to-face encounter with a Picasso for many visitors.



The installation of *Buste de Femme* in the specially constructed, climate-controlled exhibition space.

The Van Abbemuseum willingly staked one of its most financially valuable pieces of art for the artistic project instigated by Hourani, laying bare great social injustice in the process. Because, when looking at the painstaking effort put into *Picasso in Palestine*, one wonders: Why do we need to do this? Why can't Palestinian West Bank residents

make the 20-minute drive to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, to see many works equivalent to *Buste de Femme,* which is to say, universal masterpieces, on almost any given day?

Khaled Hourani, *Picasso in Palestine*, 2019, acrylic on canvas.

The International Art Academy Palestine and Van Abbemuseum achieved something that the Stedelijk Museum, with all its talk of `neutrality' and `countering polarisation', could have never done. Today, Picasso in Palestine lives on as a monument to the possibility of art institutions creating material change. The difference between the positions of these two institutions is plain and simple: one accepts the call to political commitment, the other refuses it. Moreover, from this comparison, we may be able to grasp the nature of the political agency at play. The Van Abbemuseum

did not run a poster or social media campaign, which the Stedelijk likes to do. They did not declare a program, like a political party, nor claimed a representative function, like a union. If an art institution is a political organisation, I would argue, it is so on another level.

INFRASTRUCTURAL CRITIQUE

Trying to understand this, I found it useful to read Marina Vishmidt's text *Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique*.[14] This short, lyrical essay is essentially a confrontation with a sentiment that underlies a lot of institutional nihilism: the sense that elite capture is not just real, but also inevitable. The fear that critique seems to have always already been of the museum, and the critical mind is always already corrupted by institutionalisation. Vishmidt pushes back against this defeatism by coining the refreshingly provocative notion of `infrastructural critique'. Her suggestion is to "move from the practices and theories of institutional critique in the arts and expand these ideas into an infrastructural critique of the present". If institutional critique sought to `expose' or `confront' institutional realities, infrastructural critique prioritises "the `real' (the irreducible, the traumatic, the chaotic) over the delimited, instrumental impact over symbolic action, agency over indexicality". If the legacy of institutional critique has shown that the institutional black box can be rendered transparent, infrastructural critique is here to ask: can it also be used as a projectile? May we even turn it into a building block, far beyond the traditional art world?

So, what exactly is `infrastructural' about `infrastructural critique'? Vishmidt draws on the theoretical work of Keller Easterling on infrastructures, which defines them as the repetitive structures that sustain everyday life. Because infrastructure is everywhere around us and sustained by habit, it is invisible. If I turn on the tap,

I do not really perceive the plumbing and water management system. Infrastructures only become apparent once they falter: a water faucet that stops working, the removal of public benches from train stations, or a stock market crash. At such moments of breakdown, history and power relations can be seen. The malfunctioning faucet indicates the careless privatisation of water management systems, the benchless station, the hostile architecture of public spaces, and the stock market crash the unlimited trust in competing AIs to manage the global flow of capital. Such `temporal cuts' are spaces of agency where material change can be set in motion and where, according to Vishmidt, "the speculative force of aesthetics can clarify, open up, and re-purpose these infrastructures in investigative and/or transversal political situations, as well as dis-appropriate them or their constituent parts for other ends".

14 Vishmidt, `Between Not Everything and Not Nothing, 2017.

15 Take, for example, Brian O'Doherty's seminal essay `Inside the White Cube' from 1976. The objective of this piece was never to raise questions about gallery walls, but to trace the ideology of the gallery space by means of an infrastructural analysis. The white wall is an integral part of the monochrome painting's composition. But at the same time if functions as the seemingly neutral, ahistorical membrane that separates the artwork from life and time. In short, art and its infrastructure are totally interdependent, practically as well as ideologically, and critique of one cannot exist without critique of the other.

The agency Vishmidt finds in infrastructural critique is not a rejection of institutional critique, or a new invention. Rather, it is the insistence that this agency has *always-already* been there, and anyone denying this gives the institution too much credit (is there anything more depoliticising than conceptually insistent defeatism?). We should therefore reclaim the legacy of institutional critique as a praxis of determinate negation. The negative moment of demonstration, or exposure of truth, which is usually associated with critique, is

an `aperture in the artifice' that inherently implies an alternative, a speculation, a promise, a beyond, an otherwise. The important questions of institutional critique were never just about gallery walls.[15] Good institutional critique has always been characterised by the alignment of critique of the ideology, as manifested in infrastructures such as the gallery walls, and the push for material change of conditions that inherently transgress the inside/outside dichotomy of the institution.

16 El Baroni, ed. *Between the Material and the Possible*, 2022.

17 Ekeberg, ed. *New Institutionalism*, 2003.

18 Möntmann, `The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism', 2007.

To bring this back to the museum: no matter how total, how impenetrable an infrastructure seems, temporal cuts will always appear if we look in the right places. Infrastructural critique implies a shift of focus from the opaque social system of the `art world', with its eye-catching exhibitions, scandals, reputations, management issues, and gossip, to the material production chain of art, consisting of money flows, patronage, political influence, as well as climate control, cloud services, and the labour conditions of museum guards. Importantly, infrastructural critique, to Vishmidt, exists "in a productive register – maybe even as production". In other words, infrastructural critique has an institution-building capacity. Vishmidt saw this capacity at work in Jonas Staal's *New World Summit*, the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise, and Casco Art Institute's `Climate Justice Code'. Others have since further elaborated on infrastructural critique or associated their own work with it. For instance, the book *Between the Material and the Possible* (2022), edited by Bassam El Baroni, foregrounds the closeness of art and financial speculation, sketching a kind of amazing spectrum of infrastructurally critical practices.[16]

NEW INSTITUTIONALISM

The idea of infrastructural critique and the insistence on the reclaiming of institutional critique are closely connected to New Institutionalism, a movement of politically committed, left-leaning curators and directors which emerged in Scandinavian and Baltic art institutions in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[17] In an essay on the rise and fall of New Institutionalism, curator Nina Möntmann explained that the movement "internalized the institutional critique that was formulated by artists in the 1970s and 90s and developed an auto-critique that is put forward by curators in the first place".[18] Rather than neutralising critical art, these curators and directors tried to allow critical art practices to define the institution by making the institution porous from the inside. Soon enough, the proponents of new institutionalism encountered neoliberal political backlash, and many of the associated institutions were transformed, merged, or shut down. However, a few of them remained, most notably the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, directed by Charles Esche, and the MG+MSUM in Ljubljana, directed by Zdenka Badovinac.

They continued working for decades and made a lasting impact on the institutional infrastructures of their respective institutions and the art world more broadly in two ways. The first was their participation in `alter-globalisation'. Emerging digital technologies were explored with growing interest to create a strong international network that would support resistance to neoliberalisation and precarisation, together. The European confederation L'Internationale was established, which includes large institutions like Museo Reina Sofía (Madrid, Spain), MACBA (Barcelona, Spain), M HKA (Antwerp, Belgium), MSN (Warsaw, Poland), and Salt (Istanbul, Turkey), next to Van Abbemuseum and MG+MSUM (later replaced by MSU in Zagreb). There was also a strong interest in connecting with the `instituent practices' outside the museum, especially art collectives

and organisations from the Global South. Early on, long-term collaborations were formed with ruangrupa in Jakarta, RAQS Media Collective, Sarai or Khoj in Delhi, PUKAR and crit in Mumbai. Many of these initiatives would also go on to join Arts Collaboratory, a network organisation funnelling money from a Dutch lottery fund to twenty-five art organisations in the Global South through Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.

19 Projects and in-depth case studies are archived on the Arte Útil website and have been showcased in museum exhibitions at Queens Museum, New York, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Grizedale Arts, Coniston, among other places.

A second pillar of new institutionalism was a focus on the use value of art. (Self-)instrumentalisation, as a radical rejection of the speculative value of art, was taken to be a portal to renewed autonomy. A good example is the long-term project Arte Útil, which was founded in 2013 by artist Tania Bruguera in collaboration with the Queens Museum in New York and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. Arte Útil collects examples of social action that use "new methods and social formations to deal with issues that were once the domain of the state".[19] These include, for instance, a Zapatista coffee coop in New York, an Inuit film production company, a refugee justice community center in Denmark, and a UK community enterprise that produces art in the shape of drinks. Each of these projects must fulfil eight criteria to be included:

1) Propose new uses for art within society
2) Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates
3) Respond to current urgencies
4) Operate on a 1:1 scale
5) Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users
6) Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users
7) Pursue sustainability
8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation

The motto of `useful art' soon caught on in the wider network of the L'internationale network and became a loose programmatic principle. With the publication of the book *What's the Use?* in 2016, it was turned into a comprehensive thought system, mapping out connections between the work of Bruguera and L'internationale and other artists and organisations foregrounding the question of usefulness in their practices, such as artist Jeanne van Heeswijk, the curatorial collective WHW (What, How & for Whom), and the Constructlab network. It is also from this perspective that we can understand where the Van Abbemuseum was coming from, and why it would engage in a project like *Picasso in Palestine.* Having a Picasso painting is nice. But can it also be really useful?

PICASSO IN PALESTINE AS INFRASTRUCTURAL CRITIQUE

Picasso in Palestine was a product of New Institutionalism. It was also a prime example of infrastructural critique. The project confronted and pushed through many faltering infrastructures: from difficulties finding insurance and the absence of a climate-controlled exhibition space, to the clash between the modernist universalism represented in Picasso and the repression of the Israeli apartheid regime. Taking a closer look at these infrastructural clashes, I believe we will find the answer to the initial question: are art institutions political organisations?

The organisers of *Picasso in Palestine* invited star philosopher Slavoj Žižek to travel to Ramallah and give a lecture. There is still an obscure recording online of Žižek in conversation with artist Khaled Hourani and curator Remco de Blaaij. In the video, the men discuss *Picasso in Palestine* and the wider relevance of the project. The first to take the word is Hourani:

> We get a lot of questions from journalists. Is it time to bring Picasso to Palestine? Is it a priority?

My response is:
it is normal for Picasso to travel.
What is exceptional is the state of occupation.
Bringing Picasso's portrait of a woman to Palestine
makes the work into a political statement.
People perceive different layers, from the history
of women in art to the procedures we go through –
borders, insurance, transportation.
It sheds light on the concept of museums in Europe
in general, going back to the Louvre and the
National Museum in England during the time of
colonialism, and questions what different kinds of
relationships and approaches can exist between
a museum in Europe and an institution
like the Ramallah Academy.
It brings up all of these questions.
But it is, for us, an artistic action.
It is not at all political.
Only because politics is generally hard
to remove from anything in life, it also sheds
the project in this light.[20]

As Hourani's words make clear, the International Art Academy and the Van Abbemuseum operated on a kind of second-order politics within the art world's infrastructures. There is no statement or manifesto, or program of demands. But in the act of transporting and exhibiting *Buste the Femme* in Ramallah, the abnormal normality, the terrorising absurdity of the apartheid regime became pertinently tangible.

20 Hourani, De Blaaij, and Žižek, `Žižek in Conversation about Picasso in Palestine', 2011.

21 Idem.

After Hourani, Žižek starts to speak, arguing that the artistic intervention of bringing *Buste de Femme* to Palestine had also changed the aesthetic impact of the painting: "The [portrayed woman's] gaze is split between the two eyes. Beneath, there is this terrorised, lively eye, and the upper eye is like a horrible, metallic eye,

like in Terminator. There is a crucial gap between the cold, military gaze and the terrorised gaze. This is in a minimal formula: the occupied face."[21] *Buste de Femme*'s change of face shows that *Picasso in Palestine* was, if anything, an aesthetic operation. *Picasso in Palestine* is an artwork on a 1:1 scale, which shows that *Buste de Femme* is universal; that it is a bit more universal to some than to others; that its universal value is derived from and enhanced by particularities; and that, because of this, *Buste de Femme* is a great tool for material change. It provoked ruptures in the everyday infrastructures of occupation and modernism, and used them to clarify and reappropriate the material structures within and beyond the art world. Exactly on this level, art institutions were, are, and will remain political organisations.

WHAT IS NEXT?

The time of performative social justice declarations is over. Average high-profile exhibitions will no longer read like a progressive, liberal political party program. And, indeed, museums might struggle with the information overload era. But before we jump to the conclusion that institutionality is and always has been oppressive, based on the, admittedly, copious amount of anecdotal evidence, or that a post-institutional art world is inevitable, we might give ourselves some time. Who knows, we may find that shaking off the domination of declarative politics is good riddance – because those politics were fake to begin with. Today, as we can already start seeing, the authoritarian backlash forces institutions to take a real position. Surely, most museums will choose silence and complicity if that feels like the safest option. But maybe not all of them, not fully, or totally. There might be social justice after the defeat of social justice.

In the example of *Picasso in Palestine*, we have seen what people and institutions dedicated to infrastructural

critique can achieve, even if (or maybe because) the odds are stacked against them. Other examples are discussed elsewhere in this book: the Institute of Radical Imagination is a protagonist in the chapter on basic income, the Office of Postartistic Services is featured in the chapter on artist unions, we meet Jubilee in the chapter on fair practice, and Company Drinks is discussed in *Tapping the Pipeline?* Each of these instituent entities uses the institutional infrastructures of museums to critique, reappropriate, and, most importantly, create material change. In some cases, infrastructural critique leads to the building of complex institutional infrastructures, like L'internationale, lumbung, and Arts Collaboratory. The people running these initiatives are not silly or naive. They just refuse to give up the power of institutionality to authoritarians. As artist and institution-builder Yazan Khalili, who co-founded The Question of Funding and Radio Alhara, said on the *Art in Permacrisis* podcast: "We take power to critique power."[22]

22 Khalili in conversation with Cubria and Eckenhaussen, `Art in Permarcrisis #4', 2024.

23 See: https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/18726/we-love-ruangrupa-and-the-important-decolonial-work-they-have.

Cultural abolitionism, post-institutional art narratives, and other forms of institutional nihilism may offer a categorical solution to the poor functioning of most museums. But this is exactly the problem: they are too easy. Too much like laws, perhaps. Given their puritan, sectarian nature, institutional nihilisms generate little strategic use. After all, if we want a world without institutions, we can just sit back and enjoy the view of their ongoing eradication. On the other hand, no one will defend cultural institutions as `public' or `common' goods, if not the people who are the angriest at them right now. So, suppose we want to be serious and strategic. In that case, the tricky, dirty work ahead of us is to figure out, case by case, which institutions and other parties have the courage and

artistic intelligence to engage in infrastructural critique. To find ruptures. To stay with the frustrations. To acknowledge what resources are there, how they can be repurposed, which ones cannot, and which ones are needed. Of course, to periodically reassess tactics and strategies. In other words, to remain committed to artistic and, therefore political work, within the material conditions at hand.

Illustration from an open letter published by the lumbung community, after the closing of documenta15 on September 10th, 2022.[23]

WHAT IS
ECONOMICALLY
RESPONSIBLE
ART EDUCATION?

AND
HOW CAN
WE BRING IT
ABOUT?

THE PEOPLE'S FREE ACADEMY: ON ECONOMICALLY RESPONSIBLE ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

"You are not a loan."
Strike Debt! platform

"Around us the new is dying
and the old cannot be born."
Alberto Toscano, *Politics of Study*

"The no-collar worker by day is
at war with the artist at night.
The lives of contemporary art practitioners
the world over are scarred by this battle."
RAQS Media Collective,
How to Be an Artist by Night

"Inside me there are two wolves.
One is graduating from a critical design
school. The other is unemployed."
Afonso de Matos,
Who Can Afford to Be Critical?

Art and design schools structurally fail to prepare students for the economic challenges of life after graduation, meaning graduates have a hard time imagining their professional future, let alone how to shape it. They hardly dare to say `no' to underpaid work, afraid to lose out on important opportunities. They're not sure how they can sell their work, or if they even want to. They lack knowledge of helpful institutional frameworks like payment guidelines. They have no idea about the unions and professional organisations that represent them. They have little experience with writing funding applications, negotiating payments for commissions, or filing tax returns. They have

probably never heard of gift circles or self-organised insurance schemes. They don't know how to set up a cooperative studio space. They're unaware of the fact that most artists have a `hybrid practice' and actually live off income from side jobs. They feel awkward and lost when speaking to philanthropists, gallery owners, or curators. They have no comprehensive systemic understanding of the public and private money flows that define the art world. They don't even know how much money artists make on average.

Hardly any art workers would consider economic planning and administrative activities the core of their practice, but the skills to create a more or less stable material basis is obviously indispensable to making any artistic practice economically sustainable – that is to say, to be able to do or make the things one finds important to do or make, and keep doing so in the long run. The lack of attention to this economic sustainability in the curriculum of art schools causes many graduates to experience an extremely stressful start to their careers. It's hard to keep believing in the value of `criticality', `creativity', or `autonomy' when one cannot pay next month's rent. In *Who Can Afford to be Critical?,* a 2022 graduation project from the Design Academy Eindhoven, Afonso de Matos wrote: "I tried subverting capitalism with my critical design practice. Now I'm looking for a job."[1] I have yet to meet an art school graduate who does not relate.

1 The graduation project was later turned into the book De Matos, ed. *Who Can Afford to Be Critical?*, 2022.

These problems are close to my heart. I dreamt of going to art school as a teenager, and in 2012, at the age of 18, I was accepted into my dream school, the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. On the first day, all new students were welcomed by the director, who congratulated us on our admission to "four years of heaven" – four years of free experimentation and creative expression unbothered by the `real world' outside of the academy. However, my dream was soon dispelled. I felt lonely at the academy. I

was unable to live up to unspoken expectations and opaque quality standards despite working hard and trying my best. I held out for one full, miserable year before dropping out and deciding to study art history instead.

Almost a decade later, I started working at the art workers' association Platform BK, and in that role, I talked to many art school students. I discovered that my youthful misery had been an experience many others shared; that art academies had long since lost their status as progressive, avant-gardist institutions, and that the opposite is true today – that society is changing, and academies have a hard time catching up. I saw the reports on the lack of social safety at art academies, the normalisation of competition among students, the refusal to accept that real-world problems exist within the art academy too, the silencing of voices trying to politicise institutional spaces, and the struggle of highly motivated, hardworking teachers with bad working conditions and low payment standards. It also became apparent that the widespread insecurity and precarity were used by top-level management, whose primary interest is institutional stability, to keep the community of students and teachers docile. Understanding these problems as systemic, I felt, for the first time, able to try and do something against them. So, with colleagues at Platform BK, the team of the art space Hotel Maria Kapel, and people from the Institute of Network Cultures, I started organising.

In September and October of 2021, we organised the *Post-Precarity Autumn Camp: How to Survive as an Artist* in Hoorn, the Netherlands.[2] The twenty participants were recent graduates of six Dutch art schools, many of them having previously studied at other art schools throughout Europe and beyond. During five days of intensive workshops, we discussed important topics in the practice of contemporary art workers: working in the gig economy, money flows in the art industry, experiments with crypto, staying happy and healthy, and sustainable self-organisation. It was fantastic and inspiring to explore the different dimensions of

being an art worker with young and motivated people, ready to start their careers. Still, we were left with a bitter aftertaste. With hardly any exception, participants wondered, at the end of the week: "Why did we never learn this at art school?" These remarks triggered a chain of uncomfortable realisations. What were we doing here? Compensating for the systemic negligence of public art education? Obviously, it would be impossible to fill the enormous gap in the education of our twenty participants in a single week. But worse, the initiative was too small, reaching only a tiny fraction of the students affected by the systemic problems. With our best intentions and hard work, we had become part of a wave of small-scale academic pilots and para-academic micro-initiatives, which try to prepare students for life after the academy but do not lead to systemic change.

2 The results of this camp were compiled into the *Post-Precarity Zine*, 2021.

Without further politicisation, the *Post-Precarity Autumn Camp* would remain just another band-aid for a broken system. Therefore, we decided to write an open letter to the boards of all Dutch art academies, demanding that they take more responsibility for the future of their graduates. The letter was signed by many graduates, teachers, and art workers, and picked up by several media outlets, from local newspapers to art magazines and from the artist union podcast to national radio. We received multiple invitations to come and speak at art academies about the issues of entering the `labour market', and even had some interesting but frustrating conversations with the official representative body of all Dutch art education institutions. Throughout this process, I started wondering what kind of systemic change we would need. Would it be possible to imagine an economically responsible art academy? What would its curriculum look like? And how to start creating such an institution, at a time when public institutions are tormented by budget cuts and right-wing ideological attacks?

In this chapter, I attempt to digest the many conversations, negotiations, and actions around the topic of economically responsible art education, adding personal anecdotes, historical reflections, and theory wherever I feel they are relevant. I believe that it is time to overhaul both the neoliberal and romantic axioms (entrepreneurship and artistic autonomy) that define our academies today, and to rebuild a much more politically outspoken kind of art and design education. In the process of becoming economically sustainable, academies just might recover their position of societal importance. This is quite simple and practical. In economically responsible art education, students understand the value system they are being socialised into and expected to reproduce after graduation – whether that is the art market, the creative industries, the aesthetic education of society, the imagination of the common, or something different altogether. There are plenty of serious, concrete steps that can be taken today to bring this principle closer to reality. In the hope of illustrating the range of possibilities and getting imaginations and conversations started, I conclude the chapter with ten concrete suggestions for making art and design education economically responsible.[3] But first, it's worthwhile to take a closer look at various systems of social reproduction used by art academies and how they cope with the precarity question. Let's start with the golden oldie: total refusal.

3 A previous version of these suggestions made up the open letter discussed above. See: Eckenhaussen, `Graduates of Art Academies Deserve More Agency over Their Future', 2021.

THE REGRESSIVE AUTONOMOUS ZONE

Many art schools cultivate a tactical taboo around money as a bulwark against neoliberal rule. As we know, higher education is one of the key sectors transformed by neoliberalism. Universities have been liberalised and subjected to the economic dogmas of efficiency, professional

competence, and market-oriented thinking. Budgets and spreadsheets take priority over public value and the quality of education. Unprofitable humanities and social science courses have been shut down. Universities have become perfect neoliberal knowledge machines. In this context, art schools' refusal to engage in money talk is an understandable form of resistance. Teachers don't want to direct their students' practice too much or ruin their sense of freedom with talk of sales, marketing, or negotiations. Thus, when art schools proclaim that the academy exists outside of `real life', like the director on my first day at the Rietveld, the implied understanding is not just that art and design school is an artistic free zone, but also an economy-free zone. However, on closer inspection, it is easy to see that the distinction between the academy and real life, or between artistic autonomy and material reality, is false on multiple levels and becomes increasingly untenable.

4 Abbing, *Why Are Artists Poor?*, 2008.

5 Groys, `Education by Infection', 2009, p. 27.

The academy as an economy-free zone leans on a bourgeois notion of autonomy that has been declared dead and buried many times: the idea that true artists have the divine ability to create *ex nihilo*. That one does not become an artist because of financial gain, but because of the pursuit of one's dream or even to fulfill one's vocation. In *Why Are Artists Poor?*, Hans Abbing calls this dedication the `art ethos.'[4] Think of Picasso, who in his early years in Paris shared a room with a single bed with a fellow young artist. According to myth, they took turns sleeping one night and painting the other night. The art ethos holds that poverty is proof of the real deal, the only way to gain real artistic autonomy. "Long ago", Boris Groys wrote in 2009, this "figure of the true artist began to be regarded as a perfect manifestation of kitsch."[5] But it is still among us, alive and kicking. As long as art school students scorn each other for bringing up money questions, the antiquated notion of autonomy will be reproduced and rejuvenated. As Florian

Cramer, a research professor and former director of the Rotterdam Piet Zwart Institute, wrote to me: "Who would've thought? It's easier to imagine the end of western civilization than the death of the autonomous genius."

6 The standing of Asian schools such as the Tokyo Academy of the Arts and the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing has rapidly risen over the past decades, but it is still more common for ambitious, well-situated Asian art students to come and study in Europe or the US.

7 Rosler, *Culture Class,* 2013.

Traditionally, to be respected as a beginning artist or designer, one merely has to graduate from one of the dozen or so art and design academies with high international standing, such as CalArts, the Royal College of Art in London, The New School, Central Saint Martins, Frankfurt am Main's Städelschule, or the Rietveld Academy.[6] In the book *Culture Class*, Martha Rosler has aptly called these schools the `success academies'.[7] They teach their graduates to represent the newest update of a common set of aesthetic skills and principles that are presented to define an academy, ranging from speculative social design to post-internet installation art. The function of this common aesthetic is to signal participation in a reputation economy that provides privileged access to collectors, public institutions, and funding opportunities. With sponsored graduation prizes, `best of graduates' exhibitions, and other marketing tricks, academies lure the interest of both private and public capital and steer the professional development of their students in the desired direction. Here we encounter a strange contradiction of neoliberal higher education. Education is sold to its students as a product, as if being a student equals being a client, while, at the same time, the students are the product. And the way that the student is turned into a product is not necessarily in their personal interest.

The specific model of social reproduction used by the success academies has been described by Gregory Sholette for the *Artist as Debtor*-platform:

> Within our highly entrepreneurial contemporary `art world' the majority of artists appear to be an underdeveloped resource like an army of surplus talent, especially when viewed from the perspective of major museums, gate-keeper galleries, art fairs, biennials, magazines, journals and so forth. As students we are `pre-failed' artists, as artists we are like an inert mass of dark matter that invisibly anchors the bright constellation of €47.4 billion industry in art and antiques. This alleged failure is portrayed as `natural.' It is said to be the inevitable result of too little talent or bad luck or an absence of hard work or whatever bogus filtering mechanism you wish to invoke.[8]

To identify successful artists worthy of astronomical investments, market players like gallery owners, collectors, and art advisors need to be able to discern (or create) the contrast with a much larger group of failed artists. Unsuccessful artists are therefore the dark matter of the art universe.[9] The problem with success academies is that they cater to and therefore reproduce this market. The vast majority of graduates who don't make a living with their art are not just `unsuccessful' but the deliberate product of art education: the invisible connective tissue churned out by art academies in large quantities, without whom the entire system would implode. To the success academies, it is of no importance that 95 percent of the graduates are pre-failed artists. Because the 5 percent that become art market darlings will ensure the durability of the academies' status. 5% success for the students equals 100% success for the schools.

8 Sholette, `Let's Talk About the Debt Due For...', 2015.

9 Sholette, *Dark Matter*, 2010.

To retain the prospect of survival as an artist or designer in this mess, students are left to the most

laborious type of opportunism. They must work their asses off while savvily competing for attention and opportunities. Going to an art and design academy is like running a marathon to be allowed to play a game of Russian roulette. It is the most cynical form of economic unsustainability that leeches on the extreme motivations of both students and staff, and that only students with a strong financial safety net can afford to participate in. Of course, students do fear the economic reality after graduation. But, cynically, this fear is instrumental in cultivating the money taboo. Raising economic questions within the curriculum is considered cruel, unhelpful, fear-mongering. The money taboo is, therefore, less a rejection of neoliberal market control than a form of class discrimination that enables academies to keep running their unsustainable model.

In `Expectations as Reality', an essay for the New Design Congress, Silvio Lorusso draws attention to another reason, more general and more alarming, for considering the school as an organ of the real world:

> In times of crisis, it provides less and less
> protection from the typical concerns of workers:
> students are not unfamiliar with high rents,
> housing shortages, debt of various kinds,
> poorly paid jobs or internships that don't pay at all.
> Moreover, the instability of the labour market
> changes the meaning of the school experience:
> in a climate of uncertainty,
> you don't need to know who Gary Becker is
> to instinctively adopt the prism of *investment*
> when it comes to education.
> In short, the problems of school are
> hardly distinguishable from the problems of life.[10]

Students rent rooms in the real city. They buy food at the real market. Their debt strikes are real-world politics.[11] The economic entanglements of art and design education with the macroeconomic situation have a very real impact on the artistic and personal development of

students. The larger the debt economy grows, the more the art market slumps, and the worse public institutions falter, the harder it is to ignore that art is part of `real life' – and always has been.

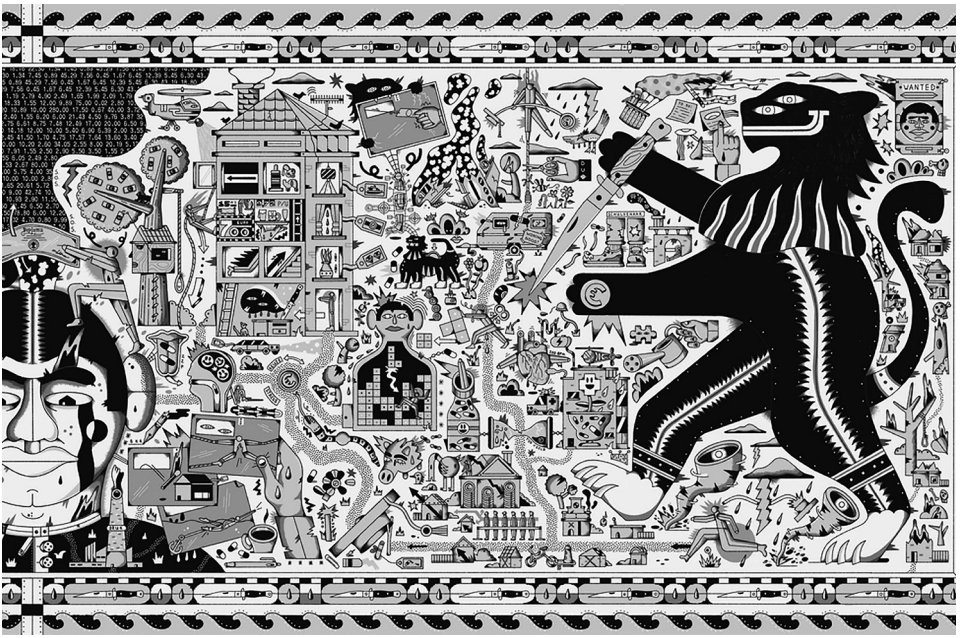
10 Lorusso, `Expectations as Reality', 2022.

11 Rich, `D.C. Hit by Mass Student Debt Protests Before Payments Resume in May', 2022.

12 `Get to Know: Class of €524.988,07', 2022.

For their graduation show in June of 2022, the Art & Research programme students of the St.Joost Academy of Art & Design collectively created the curatorial statement `Class of €524.988,07': "This number is the collective student debt of our class, which indicates how we, together, are united both by our comradery and by the financial burden that will significantly affect our lives in the years to come. By bringing this fact to the forefront, we outline an even larger issue: the conflict between the financial valuation the market assigns to artistic education [and] the actual intellectual foundations that, we think, make artistic education valuable for us and society at large."[12]

LEENSTELSEL



In 2021, the Dutch fine arts graduate Mart Veldhuis presented the graduation work Eigen Schuld, meaning both `your debt' and `your fault': "The tapestry symbolises the life of a student experiencing the burden of a continuously increasing student loan. The total value of my own student debt ultimately determines the selling price of the tapestry (€45.879,40 after tax in April 2023)."

The model of the `success academy' in the debt economy is economically unsustainable by design. Given the size of total student debt and the abominable state of the art market, it is no longer clear that the formula works even for the luckiest of graduates. At what point will the disparity between the debt accumulated to study and the speculative prospect of future success become too great to ignore? Whenever that happens, no 19th-century genius myth will be strong enough to save the success academy from its exposure as a Regressive Autonomous Zone.

THE CREATIVE INDUSTRIES ACADEMY

In the summer of 2023, exactly twelve years after my year of stress and anxiety at the Rietveld Academy, I returned to art school. This time, I joined the St.Joost Academy in Breda as a member of the research staff. It was an interesting moment. Just a year earlier, students of St.Joost had organised a funeral for the art academy under the slogan "St. Joost is dead".[13] Like many art schools in the Netherlands, St.Joost is part of a larger university of applied sciences. Without deliberation or consent of the St.Joost community, the management of the university, Avans, had decided to house its Business Innovation programme in

one of two St.Joost buildings, cutting studio space for fine art students by fifty percent. The long-term prospect was to merge art and design with creative business into a broad `creative innovation cluster'. Management considered these measures to be a realistic or necessary reset of art education, but to the students, it signalled the end of art education as such. In the following years, the organisational and administrative backbone of the art academy was dismantled, the use of expensive but dysfunctional IT systems was imposed, the university laid off all art teaching staff with temporary contracts, and it was decided to sell off the only remaining building dedicated to art and culture programmes, a beautiful former monastery, which will likely be turned into a military base or a luxury hotel.

13 `Sint Joost is dood', 2022.

These developments at St.Joost are a typical example of the creative industrial turn in art education. Creative industry policy emerged in the 1990s as part of the knowledge economy paradigm, which asserts that knowledge will be the driver of developed economies. Art and design schools like Politecnico di Milano and Design Academy Eindhoven, noticing this shift, replaced or supplemented their

romantic autonomism with the notion of cultural entrepreneurship. They rebranded `theoretical culture', `criticality', and `creativity' (originally developed by art academies during the rise of conceptualism in the 1960s and 70s) as 21st-century skills, central assets in the knowledge economy. In their view, `creatives' are specialised knowledge workers, generating a creative, innovative, disruptive type of knowledge. They call for an artist quota: an artist in every company, to keep the organisation agile and profitable, but also conscious and ethical. This notion that `creative innovation' is the gateway drug to lucrative `positive impact' is especially visible in the exploded field of design. Micro-disciplines like critical design, speculative design, geodesign, design thinking, regenerative design, interaction design, social design, behaviour design, user experience design, transformation design, design strategy, process design, dilemma-driven design, (post-)digital design, food design, molecular design, information design, total design, and many others are in a continuous rat race to be the newest, the most urgent, the most aware, and the most impactful. "Given the crumbling and fragmentation of design as a discipline, it's time to take stock," Mieke Gerritzen and Geert Lovink write: "All experiences can and will be designed."[14] Designers optimise global supply chains, clean up the plastic soup in the oceans, develop cheap renewable building materials, and programme chatbots to replace doctors. The world is nothing but a collection of problems waiting to be identified and solved by creatives. Profitably.

The creative industry academy's economic awareness and adaptive attitude towards society in flux make sense, because, in the words of RAQS Media Collective, "when art students graduate from their academies, they usually end up as `no-collar' workers in the cultural industry by day and as artists by night".[15] In this context, the question of what constitutes an education that adequately prepares a practitioner for a vocation in the contemporary arts is

primarily a matter of identifying the means to cultivate an attitude of negotiation with and around this kind of pressure. The graduate should be aware of the material conditions, and prepare to engage with them. How to juggle side jobs and a creative practice? How to set boundaries and say `no'? How to collectivise this negotiation? Unfortunately, the dominant approach of stimulating `entrepreneurship' proves to be unhelpful in reducing the precarity of graduates or increasing the level of control of graduates over their professional futures. Instead, overstretched expectations of positive impact lead to widespread disillusionment and self-doubt among young artists and designers, as Silvio Lorusso shows in *What Design Can't Do*.[16] Also, life in the creative industries turns out to be less than glamorous and equally precarious. The success academies and the creative industries academies, then, have one thing in common: their students and graduates feel lost, insecure, and unprepared for the economic reality after graduation.

14 Gerritzen and Lovink, *Made in China, Designed in California, Criticised in Europe*, 2020.

15 Raqs Media Collective, `How to Be an Artist by Night', p. 73.

16 Lorusso, *What Design Can't Do*, 2023.

17 Somzé, `Ceci N'est Pas Une Ecole D'art?', 2018.

Art educator Catherine Somzé explains the persistence of precarity among `adaptive' academies as a result of the managerial paradigm that rules higher education today. Even if the boards and management teams of art academies want to change the institution, they can't: "Stifled by bureaucracy and a dependence on national and European political agendas, art academies often cannot keep up and are doomed to fail in their attempt to become the key players in the knowledge economy which they often promise to be."[17] Understood this way, institutionality itself is the core problem of art education. The only way to outmaneuver this bureaucratic immobility, according to Somzé, is through extra-institutional or para-institutional initiatives.

THE PROJECT INSTITUTION

In the years between the art school adventure and my job at St.Joost, I studied art history at the University of Amsterdam. I arrived there in 2014, simultaneously with the announcement of large `efficiency' budget cuts in the humanities. In 2015, protesting students and staff occupied the Maagdenhuis, which housed the university board of directors and had previously been occupied during the famous 1969 protests (a year after Paris). During the occupation, the building was transformed into a shining example of what a university can be. There was a lively programme of self-organised classes and lectures by people like Jacques Rancière and David Graeber. Students established the University of Colour to fight for racial justice. There was a community kitchen, cleaning shifts, banner-making sessions, and exhibitions. Doors were open 24/7. The entire operation was governed by Occupy-style assemblies. The police violently evicted the hard-core occupiers from our building after six weeks, but the spirit of protest continued for years.

As an art history student, I also learned that I entered a field in which the politics of study had been an increasingly important topic since the mid-2000s. Museums and public galleries throughout Europe and the US had started hosting educational projects, academies, and summits en masse. Artists, curators, and researchers would reference Paolo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster,* or Joseph Beuys's educational lecture performances in every second sentence. Buzz words in exhibition texts were `education', `mediation', and `alternative knowledge production'. An important moment was the sixth edition of the roaming Manifesta biennial in 2006. Curators Mai Abu ElDahab, Anton Vidokle, and Florian Waldvogel envisioned the exhibition as a temporary school in Nicosia, the capital of Cyprus, because they found the conventional biennial format unfit to investigate the role of art and education in a world dominated by market forces. Manifesta

6 was cancelled after much turmoil, but the exhibition was later realised as an independent temporary school in Berlin and, after that, it continued as the Night School at the New Museum in New York.[18] It became the blueprint for a new kind of `exhibition as school' used by many other artists, curators, and institutions in the following years. Think of Ahmet Öğüt's The Silent University, initiated by in 2012 to organise an education platform with and for marginalised and illegalised people in art spaces, or the New World Academy, organised from 2013 until 2016 by Jonas Staal and BAK – Basis voor Aktuele Kunst to study and mobilise the role of art in stateless struggle, collaborating with the Kurdish women's movement, undocumented refugees in the Netherlands, and international pirate parties, among other groups. Irit Rogoff described this politically motivated interest in education among exhibition-makers as `the educational turn in curating'.[19] She happily welcomed the educational turn, arguing that the many interstices of art and education were the most promising sites for finding new, radical common ground and developing social transformations that reach beyond the art world.

18 Manifesta 6 was cancelled because of political pressure and ethnic tensions. Still an important moment in the Educational Turn. Read Anton Vidokle's reflections in *Art School,* p. 191.

19 Rogoff, `Turning', 2008.

20 Steenhuisen and Eckenhaussen, `Returning', 2017.

A culmination of the educational turn materialised in documenta14: Learning from Athens (2017).[20] For mysterious reasons, the curators decided to create a linear roadmap for the multi-venue exhibition in Kassel, granting one artwork the unusual honor of being the opening work of Documenta. The work in question was iQhiya's performance installation `Monday'. Most people who went to see the show in Kassel would have encountered the leftovers of an initial performance, which looked like a ritualistically deconstructed classroom situated at the dead end of a hallway in a defunct underground train station. Snippets of

paper covered in handwriting covered much of the surface: carefully arranged on the floor around six wooden school benches and a make-shift altar, stuck onto the black-tiled walls, and hung on a web of jute string. In the back, a video projection showed the interaction between an authoritarian school teacher and an energetically rebelling classroom. Reading up on the work, one might have found out that *Monday* juxtaposed two acts in this tableau: the school kids in the video rebelled against the oppressive `hidden curriculum' reproduced in conventional schools, while the deconstructed classroom in front of it was the result of an alternative, liberating education method performed *in-situ*. iQhiya member Thuli Gamedze wrote about this work in the *Documenta14 Daybook*:

iQhiya, Monday, 2017. Exhibition shot during the performance at KulturBahnhof, Kassel, documenta14. Picture: Fred Dott.

21 Gamedze, `iQhiya', n.d.

> [The hidden curriculum] is present
> in the reproductive process that
> perpetually births structures and patterns
> and infinite versions of things that perpetuate
> those structures and patterns. We understand it,
> not because we can see it, but because it tends
> to move against our own flow.
> When we – iQhiya, a collective of eleven members
> who all attended the University of Cape Town –
> are alone together, we might agree on having
> felt what this hidden curriculum does to each of us,
> but when we are being looked at, talked to,
> and seen, we are aware of the part of the hidden
> curriculum that renders us each similar versions
> of one type of person.
> So perhaps it is the falseness of this leering
> and hiding curriculum that has brought us together,
> and encouraged us to learn outside of it –
> to learn from each other – and to collaborate,
> discuss, argue, and perform together.
> iQhiya is attempting to offer an alternative
> curriculum to Black women artists in South Africa,
> one that defies the structural injustices (lessons)
> of the hidden curriculum that we
> all came to uncover in our various experiences
> of the institution.[21]

Monday was a pars pro toto in documenta14. The manifestation was full of educational and education-themed artworks, including a much talked-about Parthenon for banned books by Marta Minujín, one of Forensic Architecture's famous investigative reconstruction works, and a video installation on the history of the Non-Aligned Movement by Naeem Mohaiemen (which had a profound impact on my personal development). Picking up on the didactic vibe of the show, critic Raimar Stange wrote that many of the artworks presented were "nearly monumental, yet still loaded with political meaning and were thus convincing examples of

`critical populism' – a kind of art which is both easy to understand and critically engaged".[22] To add discursive depth to the critical populism of the show, a beautiful, heavy reader was published, with texts on neoliberal globalisation, the so-called refugee crisis, and critical pedagogy. Furthermore, the title `Learning from Athens' referenced another layer of educational ambition. The curators wanted to "decentralize and decolonize the northwestern canon" by organising the quintennial in equal parts in Kassel and Athens.[23] The title clearly suggests that the envisioned way to reach this decolonial goal was a humble, counterhegemonic act of *learning.*

22 Stange, `Documenta 14: Kassel', 2017.

23 See the Documenta14 Retrospective: https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_14#.

Just a few years earlier, in the aftermath of the 2007 financial crash, the German government treated Southern European member states of the EU with utter contempt, especially singling out Greece for its alleged lack of self-restraint on the financial markets and the laziness of its people. To many Greeks who had lost their jobs or seen their savings and pensions evaporate into thin air, this understandably felt like adding insult to injury. Testifying to the enormous frustration, images of Angela Merkel with a Hitler mustache widely circulated online and in Greek public spaces. In this context, the fact that the world's largest German art manifestation suggested that Germans should abandon their moral high ground and learn from their Greek peers was a breath of fresh air. It was also in line with the education-heavy set-up of the entire documenta14 project. Fundamentally, the exhibition was an attempt to expose how the hidden curriculum of neoliberalism and colonialism circulates in art, media, and public space, how it undermines solidarity and public institutions, and where to start co-learning differently. Some critics scrutinised the double exhibition in Kassel and Athens as a schizophrenic project, simultaneously critiquing and affirming neocolonial

power relationships.[24] First, they came to take the pensions, then the knowledge. Yet, a significant sum of money (2 million euros budgeted plus 5,4 million euros overspent) was redistributed from German taxpayers and sponsors to the art scene in Athens, which still stands out to me as the kind of significant material act we need more of in the arts. Documenta14 also testified to a readiness to politicise art to defend education as a quintessential social good, and a shared belief that non-commercial education, channeled through art, could make the world a better place.

24 This debate is covered on the documenta14 retrospective website: https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta_14#.

25 Sternfeld, `Unglamorous Tasks', 2010.

This optimistic view of the educational turn needs to be somewhat nuanced. Curator Nora Sternfeld was one of the first to take a step back and critically question the societal function of the educational turn in the 2010 article `Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?'[25] It was nice that education was a trendy topic in art, she argued, but it wasn't exactly new. Ever since they were first established in the late eighteenth century, public art institutions have had educational aspirations and institutional apparatuses of museum educators. If anything, the educational turn in art was a *return* to education as one of the core functions of the art institution. While that's still great, the timing of this return raises question marks. Education was gaining momentum in art institutions, but, at the very same time, funding for public education was being slashed throughout Europe as part of post-financial crisis austerity politics. It is hard not to understand the educational turn to be, at least in part, a product of neoliberal politics – as a return of education to art, transformed and fragmented by privatisation. This ambivalence shows if we look at the organisation of educational turn-programmes. Many of these initiatives were much more radical, politically vocal, and community-based than traditional art education. They made

tactical use of the spaces, budgets, and energies available but, in doing that, they always remained on the level of initiatives: small, temporary or intermittent, not-exactly-institutional projects or pilots. This obviously puts a huge strain on the duration and scale of educational outcomes. Can one unlearn in a day or a month what was learned over the course of decades?

All of this is not to say that the question of `the academy' never came up in the educational turn. Already in 2007, a four-day `Summit Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education' was organised in Berlin in 2007 "to rethink education and the term `academy'", with speakers and organisers including Irit Rogoff and Nora Sternfeld. And the explosion of education initiatives was visible within art and design academies as well. There have never been more guest lectures, temporary and pilot programmes, mutual support platforms, or short-lived student unions, and even some long-term art education initiatives at the edges of or outside traditional art academies. A few examples of this latter category are the Free/Slow University of Warsaw, an informal research group established in 2009, whose independence allowed them to collaborate with art workers' trade unions and carry out valuable research into the working conditions of the art field; Open School East, founded in London in 2013 as a free art school for emerging visual artists from diverse, lower socio-economic backgrounds; the School of Commons, an educational residency program piggybacking on the bloated institutional infrastructures of the ZHdK in Zürich; and the Feral Art School, a cooperative art school in Hull, formalising the always-already cooperative nature of art education by making the entire curriculum exchange-based. Such co-operative art education, in Sophia Kosmaoglou's words, is the `pie in the sky', a true commons, beyond public and private.[26]

Gerald Raunig, who co-founded the para-academic European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP), describes these kinds of durational structures

with the fantastic oxymoron `project institutions'. They combine duration and the care for sustained structures with precarity, depending mostly on project subsidies and the un(der)paid labour of already overworked and underpaid cultural workers. Project institutions are important exercises in building institutions of the common, but we shouldn't fetishise them. In Raunig's view, they are even "the dominant institutional form of (self-)exploitation in contemporary capitalism".[27] Is this the art academy of the future?

26 Kosmaoglou, `Co-operative Art Education Is the Pie in the Sky', 2023.

27 Raunig in conversation with Meineche Hansen and Vandeputte, `Towards Institutions of the Common', 2015, p. 33.

From all the bottom-up initiatives in the educational-turn era, the one that came closest to causing structural change in public art education was probably the Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC for short. In the early 2010s, video conferencing software had finally become user-friendly and stable. (Google Classroom launched in the summer of 2014.) This was a time of unironic accelerationism, and online classrooms felt like genuinely new spaces (as opposed to multi-media add-ons to traditional media and institutions). The digital commons movement was still strong. In this context, the idea of the massive open online course made sense. Anyone could launch an urgent, quick-and-dirty course for a virtually unlimited number of participants. Access would be global, making the MOOC especially groundbreaking in places where no good public education system existed. Online-only operations and massive scale would drastically lower operating costs per student and reduce student fees proportionally. Lectures could be given once and recorded, freeing up teaching hours for personal attention and exchange. Several art academies tried out the MOOC model, and some project institutions like The New Centre for Research & Practice, established in 2014, experimented with MOOC-exclusive operations.

Ten years later, the world looks very different. The Covid pandemic made the hybrid classroom a reality for all and, in the process, drained the utopian energy from online education initiatives. It's impossible not to be aware of internet access inequality, timezone borders, and Zoom fatigue. The Metaverse flopped. And while there are plenty of online courses today, the MOOCs' promise of radically accessible, high-quality education was never delivered. The only thing left from the pivot to online art education is a handful of private, American peer education communities like Do Not Research and New Models presenting an `alternative' on monetised platforms like Discord and Substack. It's unsurprising, then, that the MOOC has long since stopped capturing the imagination of art educators. Yet, it still feels like the possibilities are not exhausted. Maybe the MOOC-based art school could be tried once again, this time as a co-operative or solidly embedded in a publicly funded institution, with a decentralised network of production facilities, and scaling fees according to participants' material circumstances (location, income, need).

28 In 1998, Pelle Ehn published the `Swedish Digital Bauhaus Manifesto'.

All in all, it is clear in hindsight that the educational turn was a one-way street, politically speaking. For a while, art institutions were politicised to defend public education and created a boom of alternative education initiatives. It certainly impacted public art institutions. Long after the trendiness of education in art has ceased, education programmes as part of exhibitions and festivals are still commonplace. But its transformative power never reached the institutions historically tasked with educating art workers – the art academies. While wider discussions around the political engagement of art and social art practice have dominated public discourse, art academies have managed against all odds to uphold their status as happy playgrounds outside of `real life'. They continued to churn out artists and designers in large numbers,

without teaching students how to deal with the `saturated market' after graduation. Initiatives that were developed got stuck at the level of pilots and projects, or at best became project institutions, but in any case, remained outside public institutions proper. They did not lead to structural changes in the curriculum or governance of art and design academies. Despite all good and serious efforts, there was too little attention for a basic question: how can art seriously critique ideological structures or prefigure decolonial, inclusive futures, if the material structures of social reproduction in the art world's educational institutions are based on extraction and precarisation?

THE PEOPLE'S FREE ACADEMY

In September of 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the establishment of a New European Bauhaus (NEB): the newest, grandest, and most top-down in a series of attempts to revive the legacy of Europe's most famous modernist art and design academy.[28] The very birth of the public Western art and design academy has often been associated with the establishment of the Bauhaus in 1919. In the first years of its existence, the curriculum was based on the crafts-focused tradition of the Jugendstil and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Later, the focus on craft was overtaken by the functionalist design approach associated with the director Walter Gropius. Students learned to use materials like wood, glass, ceramics, and metal in dedicated workshops, and were educated to create mass-produced, broadly accessible design pieces. Teachers and graduates of this academy gained fame for their tube-frame furniture, use of geometric shapes, and architectural products that foregrounded the function of windows and light. This latter phase is often regarded as the `real' Bauhaus and the school that defined the modernist art academy. (Today, many art schools still work with

the `Bauhaus model' of material workshops.) But the change between the phases of Bauhaus might not have been the radical, innovative break is often taken to be. Cultural philosopher Thijs Lijster has pointed out that there was an important continuity across these stylistically different phases. Throughout the history of its operations, Bauhaus was characterised by the strong connection between art education and social imaginaries. The goal of the Bauhaus was to design (public) life for an emergent modern society. Art and design were fundamentally understood to be a social good. This baseline runs deeper than any stylistic approach, and it was true for Bauhaus 1 as much as for Bauhaus 2. Thus, if there is any foundational principle to the `Bauhaus model', it must be that, inherently, art and design students are educated to contribute to the common good.[29]

29 Lijster, *De grote vlucht inwaarts*, 2016, pp. 48-51. As discussed above, these aspirations have been entirely lost during the neoliberalisation of contemporary art education (even if many academies still reside in Bauhaus-style buildings, with large glass facades, flexible classrooms, and material-based workshops – trapped in an undead zombie modernism that many have come to call postmodernism).

30 Hicham Khalidi and Rolando Vázquez wrote in an open letter to Ursula von der Leyen and Frans Timmermans: "We understand that the reference to the Bauhaus wishes to convey forward and interdisciplinary thinking, but we feel that the allusion to this school, its effects and their specific moment in history, counteracts the aims that this cultural European Green Deal is trying to achieve. We are deeply concerned that the title New European Bauhaus is inherently not inclusive." Khalidi, Vázquez, et al. `Objections to the Term New European Bauhaus', n.d.

31 Lovink, `Extinction Bauhaus', 2020.

How does this approach map onto the New European Bauhaus, if at all? The NEB is not a single art school, but a huge funding programme stimulating European art schools, universities, and companies to make the "green transition in built environments and beyond enjoyable, attractive and

convenient for all". It was met with a mixed reception among critical thinkers in the arts. Some critiqued the neocolonial vistas of modernity implicit in the name New European Bauhaus as "inherently not inclusive".[30] Others insisted that cultural workers should strategically use "the political momentum providing a context of urgency to found a network of experimental interdisciplinary `green deal' art schools".[31] In any case, it is obvious that the NEB is a forceful, top-down reframing of the legacy of public art education in Europe. Creative interdisciplinarity is mobilised as a problem-solving capacity in the green transition. Behind the `forward-thinking' agenda, the grand narrative of market liberalism in education remains intact, and so do the clichés of autonomy and entrepreneurship. Maybe, taking on public institutions at the height of austerity politics felt too daunting, too bureaucratic, and too complex during the educational turn. But giving up the demand that art schools function as public institutions gave free rein to a top-down overhaul by bureaucrats. As a result, now that the Bauhaus is turned into a publicly funded market incubator, we can't even imagine defending its legacy as a production house of social imaginaries for the common good. Until we dare look in another direction.

In the summer of 2024, for the first time since 2015, large protests and occupations took place at the University of Amsterdam as part of the international Free Palestine movement. Student Encampments were established as `liberated zones' two or three times. But after several short-lived attempts, each ended with police violence, the organisers changed tactics and joined forces with the Amsterdam squatting movement. Newly squatted buildings were turned into campuses of what they called the People's Free University, hosting daily reading vigils, lecture programmes, teach-ins, and workshops, and publishing booklets, zines, and a People's Paper. At this time, I worked at the Institute of Network Cultures (next to the job at St.Joost), a research group of the Amsterdam University

of Applied Science. As members of the academic community, my colleagues and I joined the protests, hosted the Tactical Media Room Palestine, donated books to makeshift libraries, and co-organised a podcast recording at the Shadia Abu Ghazaleh campus. To me, the biggest lesson was just how true the name `People's Free University' felt. There was a strong sense of empowerment. The real university is not made up of big buildings and highly paid managers, but us, the students, teachers, researchers, the people, gathered in political unity. Can we make a People's Free Art Academy as well?

Liberation Library at the Amsterdam Student Encampment, photographed by Alina Lupu.

It's important here to call to mind how Italian comrades working in the post-operaist tradition deal with the questions of publicness and public funding. In building the institution of the common, they insist: all public funding is money of the people. Therefore, when we claim public support for art education, it is not a plea for centralised state apparatuses, but for the building of an academy of the people. It is also up to us, the people, to fight for the definition of our public institutions. To insist that the role of publicly funded art education is not to invent the next generation of exclusive commodities. To reject modernist determinism and nationalism. To defend artists and designers as problem creators rather than problem solvers. To prove that the interdisciplinary profession of world-building through imagination is neither outdated nor superfluous. To show that public art education is defined by the common development of common futures.

To me, it's glaringly obvious that the People's Free Academy needs to create space for students to develop co-ownership and belonging in every way, including economically. It is crucial that students can determine their social position critically, independently, and with equal opportunities, based on a socially and economically literate image of life after the academy. Ten suggestions to this end are:

1. Develop post-precarity courses. Organise collaborative application writing, role-playing games to practice artist fee negotiations, budget drafting, setting up blockchain gift circles, and studio space co-ops. Teach workers' rights and solidarity models. Practice saying `no'. Invite union organisers, alumni, gallerists, and philanthropists. Make these curriculum changes structural.
2. Support social engagement and self-organisation. Embrace petitions, reading groups, community kitchens, collective living, and working spaces.
3. Acknowledge that art and design schools exist in reality. Students are and always have been real

people dealing with real problems in the real world. Learn from them.

4. Support students dealing with the post-graduation void. Offer production facilities and guidance. Organise a post-capitalist career day. Help finding housing and studio spaces. Map funding sources. Make a nice side job repository. Know your city, be locally specific.
5. Stop the social Darwinism of graduation prizes and other toxic marketing stunts. Ban private sponsorships for graduation projects. Market logic is not welcome at the People's Free Academy.
6. Involve students in institutional governance and politics. Strengthen the student councils. Support student unions. Cherish bottom-up initiatives.
7. Abandon the myth of creative entrepreneurship. Teach students how to resist becoming a creative day labourer in the gig economy. Define the freedoms and responsibilities of students, and measures taken to guard the students from the stealth revolution of neoliberalism.
8. Abandon the ideal of autonomous individualism, too. Teach deliberate interdependence and wilful cooperation.
9. Break the money taboo. Discuss economic realities. Ignorance does not lead to artistic freedom; confidence does.
10. Explicate your vision on the role of art education in society, labour relations, the art market, the city, public institutions, and art of the people. Publish a vision statement. Be honest: What is your political outlook? Why do you educate future art workers, and what do you find important to teach them? Are you the People's Free Academy?

WHAT'S WRONG
WITH
AN ART SYSTEM
FUNDED
BY GIFTS
FROM THE RICH?

AND HOW
DO WE
RECLAIM
GENEROSITY?

PHILANTHROPY
STRIKE:
A
NEW
CULTURE
OF
GIVING

"How would you describe your patronage on a scale from Medicis to Sacklers?"
@freeze_magazine

Centuries before public funding for culture became a European fact of life, aristocrats supported artisans and scholars with commissions and stipends, even housing them in their courts or mansions. Imagine Leonardo Da Vinci at his desk, inventing war machines for the De Medici family in Florence, or Hans Holbein the Younger painting royal portraits in his studio near the court of Henry VIII in London. Multiply by a thousand, and you get an idea of the widespread network of homines universales. It is widely recognised that these court artists played a crucial role in the development of the Renaissance in Italy. Less often, we think of the role played by patronised artists and philosophers in the church reformations in the North, which happened at the same time, and which Max Weber has famously described as the birth of `the spirit of capitalism.'[1] With their work on rationalism, critical thinking, and individual responsibility, thinkers like Spinoza and Erasmus laid the philosophical foundations for the protestant work ethic. To do this work, the philosophers depended on a kind of single-subscriber Substack model. They would correspond with wealthy protestant businessmen, writing treatises in letter format and receiving money and gifts in return. Just as there could be no protestant work ethic without Spinoza or Erasmus, the work of Spinoza or Erasmus could not have existed without the support of patronage from the protestant elites.

Today, as public funding is declining, artists and institutions looking for alternative funding sources are increasingly turning toward patronage once again. There are still plenty of big philanthropists today and even more

middle-class donors who are thrilled to be a `friend of the museum', support their favourite podcast on Patreon, or contribute to a band's first album on Kickstarter. With the almost endless potential of donorships, many people hope that a `new culture of giving' can save culture from the collapse of the welfare state. But can it? And if it can, what would be the result? Are there any strings attached? How does the influx of private gifts change the public face of art and the working conditions in the field?

TOTALLY IRRELEVANT?

My interest in these questions around philanthropy was triggered by a remarkable rise in donorship in the Dutch cultural field, which is best explained through an example from the port city of Rotterdam. On July 2nd, 2023, the Dutch State Secretary of Culture revealed *Moments Contained* in front of the Rotterdam Central Station. *Moments Contained* is a larger-than-life bronze statue by the sculptor Thomas J. Price. It depicts a Black woman standing confidently in the middle of the downtown square, with her clenched fists in the pockets of her tracksuit bottoms. A newspaper journalist who came down to report on the reactions of passers-by found that people absolutely loved the artwork, calling it an `everyday girl' but also `pure truth'. *Moments Contained*, the reporter concluded, became an "instant Rotterdam icon".[2]

1 Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, 1904.

2 Kamerman, `Het beeld staat er nog geen twee maanden en is nu al een Rotterdams icoon', 2023.

Unfortunately, *Moments Contained* is a true icon in multiple ways – not all of them positive. Sure enough, the statue is an ode to the city's diverse citizenry. But it is also an icon of the exploitation of Rotterdam's dock workers by the few family firms owning the Port of Rotterdam and its shipping operations. *Moments Contained* was gifted

to the city by Droom & Daad, the private philanthropic foundation of Martijn van der Vorm. Van der Vorm is the offspring of a family of Rotterdam shipping magnates and the inheritor of the family investment firm HAL (the former Holland-America Line). Apparently, the youngest inheritor of the family fortune has taken a serious liking to philanthropy in recent years. The gift of *Moments Contained* was part of an enormous, multi-year campaign, in which Droom & Daad donated 793 million euros to social and cultural initiatives in Rotterdam.[3] As a token of gratitude, the municipal administration granted Droom & Daad various special benefits, ranging from regular private meetings with city officials, receiving the first invitation to buy whenever the municipality sells one of its buildings, and exemptions from the standard integrity investigations by the municipality's real estate department.[4]

3 Dohmen, `In het spoor van de weldoener met 800 miljoen', 2023.

4 Geluk, `Hoe de steenrijke familie van der vorm macht en invloed koopt in Rotterdam', 2020.

5 Idem.

6 Persson and Misset, `Wie is de geheimzinnige familie die Rotterdam verreikt', 2023.

7 Idem.

8 My main collaborators were visual artist Timo Demollin and Platform BK co-director Koen Bartijn. To organise the symposium, *The State of Patronage*, discussions were initially held with two small art institutions that hosted a socially engaged art programme while receiving philanthropic support. Both institutions ultimately did not dare to host the symposium, in one case because of explicitly expressed fears of `patron bashing'. The Mondrian Fund, the national Dutch visual arts fund, which had been invited to join the discussion several times, also rejected participation and was very displeased with the symposium. In the end, the art space Framer Framed hosted and fully supported the political vision of the event. See: https://www.platformbk.nl/de-staat-van-mecenaat and Eckenhaussen, ed. *De bevrijding van het mecenaat*, 2023.

Some would argue Van der Vorm uses his fortune to buy power.[5] Others may say that he's just generous. In any case, Droom & Daad has undeniably developed an intimate relationship with the local authorities, with equally undeniable side benefits. In a big 2023 newspaper article, the Volkskrant reported that, during the years in which Droom & Daad built a public image of generosity, the Van der Vorm family had structurally evaded nearly all Dutch taxes. Both the enormous family fortune, estimated at 9 billion euros, and the large profits of its HAL company have been obscured from the tax authorities. Capital flows from Rotterdam via Bermuda and Curaçao to Monaco.[6] At this point, the money may be anywhere – except in the Dutch tax office. In normal circumstances, one would expect government officials to be critical of such tax evasion. Not, however, in this case. The Volkskrant questioned Rotterdam's mayor, Ahmed Aboutaleb, about the fiscal constructions of the city's biggest philanthropist. The mayor responded that this tax evasion, to him, is "totally irrelevant".[7] The benefits, it seems, of an intimate relationship.

This story of art-washing is, unfortunately, not an isolated incident. Fat cash prizes, big-name exhibitions, large-scale renovations, spectacular public artworks, and big scandals are changing the public display of art and undermining the democratic governance of art institutions. *Moments Contained* is the poster artwork for the rising influence of toxic philanthropy in Europe.

In the rest of this chapter, I will try to flesh out this observation with further cases and analyses. Many of these examples will be from the Netherlands, because I will be building on several years of work at Platform BK. Between 2020 and 2023, Platform BK published online essays, organised a symposium, and published a book of essays, often running into the pitfalls of general disinterest and (mild) suppression, but also learning a lot.[8] The goal was never to make a objective analysis but to cultivate an explicitly political discourse on European arts philanthropy. How

can we overcome the deadlock of self-censorship? But also: what to do? Are we going to let power-hungry philanthropists take over, or will we push back? Can we save the culture of giving from the grip of toxic philanthropists?

AN ETHICS OF PATRONAGE

Often, discussions about patronage get bogged down in moral wrangling between critics and pragmatists. Critics denounce that wealthy patrons or corporations impose their individual tastes on the public, especially if money was donated by dubious parties such as arms traders, plantation agriculture companies, the fossil industry, betting companies, or flash traders. These critiques, however, are ineffective in convincing proponents of patronage, who in turn put forward a wide range of pragmatic arguments. According to them, patronage is simply necessary to survive as a cultural worker or organisation. It is allegedly hypocritical to accuse patrons of exerting power, while governments also create strict frameworks for art production (diversity, inclusion, and regional distribution are often the order of the day – along with the high regulatory pressure that this entails). And as long as nothing illegal happens, people in the cultural sector should stop judging each other. Let's look on the bright side, these proponents say; private donations are the ultimate sign of commitment when support for culture is eroding.

Even the most obvious-seeming ethical boundaries in arts philanthropy turn out to be thorny issues in practice. A good example is the fossil industry's sponsorship of arts and culture. After years of campaigning by Fossil Free Culture NL, most Dutch arts organisations have banned fossil sponsors, and a consensus seems to have formed in `the sector'.[9] Yet the Groninger Museum still accepts structural sponsorship by the state-owned fossil fuel companies Gasunie and GasTerra. While the earth underneath the feet of people in Groningen was being drilled to pieces to extract

natural gases, museum director Andreas Blühm claimed to be proud of his partnerships with these "pioneers in the energy transition".[10] Blühm systematically ignored calls from local artists and cultural workers to cut ties, and stubbornly held on to his misinformed beliefs regarding the energy transition. His tone-deafness perfectly illustrates that we cannot rely on ethical common sense as a regulatory principle in philanthropic arts funding.

9 Fossil Free Culture, `Disobedient Art Can Win the Fight Against Artwashing', 2018.

10 De Linkse Mannen, `#26: Gas en het Groninger Museum', 2022.

11 Van Dam, `Vordense miljardair (85) voor de rechter om Iraaks gifgas', 2023.

12 See: https://www.oorlogsbronnen.nl/thema/Spitfire%20Fund.

It is also important to note that more `extreme' industries, such as the weapon industry, may seem distant from the art world, but that is not always the case either. Museum Moore in the Dutch town of Ruurlo displays a collection of (neo)realist art. The museum and its collection (largely built up from the integrally acquired art collection of former banker Dirk Scheringa) are owned by the estate of the late chemical magnate Hans Melchers. Melchers was convicted in 1986 of supplying the Iraqi government with chemicals that could be used to make chemical weapons. A civil lawsuit based on the same allegations was pending against Melchers until he passed away in 2023.[11] Historical links between patronage and the arms industry are also prominent. The Prince Bernhard Culture Fund (which recently changed its name to `Culture Fund' because a Nazi party membership card of the Prince was found in the archives) was established in London in August 1940 under the name Spitfire Fund, aiming to raise money for war materiel.[12]

To avoid individual failures in ethical judgment, researcher and art writer Roel Griffioen has proposed that an `ethics of patronage' ought to be constructed: "We are not used to demanding public accountability from private interests that are active in the public arena", but, he

argues, we should.[13] In a similar fashion, independent curator Àngels Miralda Tena has written about the role and responsibility of `ethical patrons', placing special emphasis on the defense of public institutions: "With a disappearing boundary between the private and public we all need to confront the question of how to promote social values in a world in which they are on the point of extinction. The role of the patron should not encourage this situation, but fight together with cultural actors against the elimination of public institutions."[14] Tena's definition of ethical patronage implies respect for the democratic principle that power over a publicly funded institution is not for sale. We can extrapolate that a patron does not belong on a supervisory board. Nor should owners of loaned artworks be able to interfere with exhibition policy in any way. Clearly, a special municipal steering committee for a philanthropic foundation should be out of the question. Such ethics of patronage could be formalised in a code or declaration. But this kind of self-regulation only really works if the ethical discussion on patronage is directly translated into a real political stance.

A good example of such a stance was given by US artist Andrea Fraser in her 2017 lecture in Cologne on `Trusteeship in the Age of Trump'.[15] She criticised venture capital investor Steven Mnuchin's membership of the Board of Trustees of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. Not only did Mnuchin make his fortune trading in home foreclosures, but he also took charge of fundraising for Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016. Fraser considered Mnuchin's position untenable. In a open letter she wrote, she stated:

> Since the late 1960s, the art field has seen waves of concern over the influence of trustees and patrons on museum programs and collections. Unfortunately, these concerns often ignore the broader structural conditions and consequences of the US system, which places

> responsibility for cultural institutions – and also many educational and social-welfare functions – with philanthropic organizations. These organizations are plutocratic in the most basic sense of the word: institutions that are considered public and provide basic social functions, but are governed by a minority of the wealthiest citizens according to their own interests, with little or no democratic input or oversight.[16]

The letter, which several art world hotshots co-signed, proved effective. Mnuchin stepped down from the MOCA's Board of Trustees in 2016. However, I believe that the real achievement of Fraser's efforts goes beyond the tactical victory. By linking the critique of Mnuchin and the reliance on patronage to a critique of political systems, Fraser shows that the debate on patronage is not just about imposing taste or the question of what money is ethically acceptable. There is a direct relationship between patronage and the distribution of power and control. Studying the US context, Fraser observes that patronage contributes to the rise of plutocracy. Is this also happening on our side of the Atlantic? What are the politics of philanthropy in Europe?

13 Griffioen, `Retort #26', 2022.
14 Miralda Tena, `Privatising the Institution', n.d.
15 Fraser and Golo Stone, `Philanthropy and Plutocracy', 2017.
16 Idem.
17 Velthuis, `Amerikaanse toestanden', 2008.

PATRONAGE BEYOND THE EUROPEAN WELFARE STATE

The US is nearly always used as the default reference point for arts philanthropy. On the one hand, proponents often argue that patronage works in the US, and should therefore work in Europe, too, while, on the other hand, critics denounce the corporatisation of museums as a dangerous style of `Americanisation'.[17] In September 2023, Caroline Lapidaire,

a sponsorship fundraiser for the debate center De Balie, published an op-ed in a prominent Dutch newspaper titled `Stop the Americanisation of the cultural sector'.[18] Indeed, the corporatisation of cultural institutions and the growing power of private donors are reminiscent of the situation in the US. However, the usefulness of measuring the Dutch cultural system against the American standard is limited.

18 Lapidaire, `Stop de veramerikanisering van de cultuursector', 2023.

19 Miralda Tena, `Privatising the Institution'.

Back to Miralda Tena. She noted that a gift in Europe fundamentally differs from gifts in the US. Almost all European art institutions were built with public funding or went through some form of collectivisation after the Second World War. Therefore, the distribution of money and governance in the arts is, in principle, subject to democratic, transparent, and accountable processes. Miralda Tena concludes that arts philanthropy in Europe, regardless of intentions, always inherently contributes to the ongoing undermining of the idea of culture as a public good:

> The privatization of culture in itself
> is the most symbolic producer of alienation
> and elitism within the art world.
> It is also a uniquely European phenomenon. [...]
> Other geographical contexts have not had the
> privilege to rely on stable state structures
> of cultural funding for longer periods of time.
> Organizations in the United States rely on private
> donations as a norm, and organizations
> such as Istanbul Biennial, supported by the Koç Family,
> have signed long-term agreements to continue
> private funding commitments.
> In these circumstances, private patronage is not
> only necessary but admirable in that it notices
> and fills a void which is simply
> not provided by the state.[19]

The emergence of new forms of patronage in the context of the (crumbling) welfare state is, in other words, a typically European phenomenon, which raises a unique set of questions. Who decides what the public programmes of art institutions look like, and what kind of art is acquired by public collections? To what extent is art a public industry worthy of public support? And what are the practical implications of the ideal of a `democratic' art supply?

20 Faes, `De Nieuwe Messias', 2023. My translation.

21 Idem.

Art critic and policy advisor Nous Faes has linked emerging patronage in the Netherlands to the availability of structural tax avoidance methods. In her analysis, based on a research report commissioned by the Dutch Minister of Finance in 2022, she states:

> [Over the past 15 years,] wealthy Dutch people
> have avoided tax en masse using donations
> to their own charities; there were even millionaires
> who paid zero euros in income tax
> due to their gift deduction.
> Thus, 66% of millionaires who made large periodic
> (= multi-year and legally fixed) donations
> were found to do so to a charitable organisation
> set up by themselves; of those with more
> than 25 million assets, 94% did so.
> Besides tax avoidance by siphoning off
> private assets, such as shares and paintings,
> having your own charity also offered opportunities
> to claim high expenses.[20]

European patronage is thus characterised by a striking reversal: tax benefits such as exemption from income and corporate tax are a gift from society to the philanthropist. These gifts to the philanthropists are, ironically, increasingly untenable because of the high-level structural tax evasion and growing financial inequality. In the mid-to-long run, Faes argues, political intervention is inevitable.[21] I wonder: would it be possible to turn

tax exemptions into investment requirements, forcing philanthropists who fund their own private museums to donate the same amount to a public cultural fund?

THE POLITICS OF UNCERTAINTY

Our analysis would fall short if we explained the acceleration of patronage at the expense of the treasury as an administrative mistake. Rather, it is an integral part of the European neoliberal post-welfare state. To analyse the symbiotic relationship between neoliberalism and philanthropy in Europe, we must closely inspect the inherent politics of patronage.

Patronage is characterised by high levels of uncertainty and elusiveness, which nevertheless harbour an attractive promise of certainty or stability. This is most obviously true for artists, curators, and other independent art workers. Most philanthropists only support institutions. If their money eventually reaches the art workers, it is through an uncertain trickle-down effect. Moreover, most philanthropic funds uphold arbitrary, hard-to-understand assessment criteria and a `don't call us, we'll call you'-principle. It is, in short, impossible for most individual, independent art workers to rely on patronage. And yet... There is always the promise, or the dream, of the gift: a lucky stipend, prize, or residency, which keeps precarity at bay for a few months or, who knows, even a few years.

The obvious exception to this rule is crowdfunding. Platforms like Voordekunst, Patreon, Substack, and Kickstarter are designed to give control back to creators. Independent cultural workers set their own goals and run their own campaigns. Which is great, if it works. But crowdfunding campaigns are, in general, hard work with small rewards, if any. In 2014, Silvio Lorusso made the darkly hilarious artwork *Kickended*, an archive of Kickstarter's $0-pledged campaigns. "By bringing to the

fore crowdfunding projects with no backers," Lorusso writes, "Kickended contributes to subvert the success bias produced at the level of both media storytelling and Kickstarter's ranking algorithms. In this sense, it encourages a realistic perspective on the much hyped self-entrepreneurship."[22] Despite their promises to put creators in the driver's seat, in the end, the ruling logic of crowdfunding platforms is that of virality. Its unreliability is not defined by some rich person's taste, but by the mood of the algorithm.

22 See: https://silviolorusso.com/work/kickended.

23 However, we can't be sure how big these personal gains are. One of the key findings of the Private Museum Research is: "While we know from anecdotal evidence that opening and operating a private museum can come with substantial tax benefits for the founder as well, the generally low degree of transparency when it comes to finances and governance has impeded us to estimate the size of these financial benefits." Velthuis a.o. *Beyond the Global Boom*, 2023.

Art institutions, too, experience the insecurity of patronage, albeit in different ways. Donations make up a small percentage of the total income of public institutions and broadly follow the preferences of public funds. Unlike in the case of public funds, personal honour or gain often play a bigger role in patronage than transparency and good governance.[23] As a survey by the Private Museum Research project of the University of Amsterdam shows, there is a global increase in private museums that run (almost) entirely at a patron's expense, but these are on average less than 15 years old and often very fragile. There can be no question of a stable public function in such volatile organisations. Yet patronage holds magical promises for legacy public institutions too: the purchase of a masterpiece, the construction of a new wing, or, increasingly, the rescue from certain demise.

Finally, the local, mostly urban community also faces uncertainty caused by patronage. Since the rise of real

estate patronage, patrons have played a greater role in distributing space for arts and culture in Dutch cities. Often, real estate patrons provide a unique opportunity for a new art space. But these usually come with temporary contracts, which means the art organisation quickly loses its place and can never build a sustainable relationship with the local public. Ultimately, the added value of the `cultured' real estate goes to the investor, while the arts organisation and the residents are the victims of the gentrification process.

So, it appears that patronage imposes an arbitrary distribution of securities on workers, on institutions, and on (urban) communities. This arbitrariness largely eludes critical analysis because gifts are *supposed* to be free of demands and constraints, as much as the recipient is expected to be grateful. Don't bite the hand that feeds you... Yet it is precisely this game of distributing certainty and uncertainty on the ruins of the welfare state that is at the heart of the politics of patronage.

PATRONAGE AS A FUNCTION OF NEOLIBERAL GOVERNANCE

How does the function of uncertainty in patronage politics relate to public administration? We will stick with the example of the Netherlands, where, remarkably, public funding for art has also become highly insecure and unreliable over the past 30 years. Under the guise of professionalisation, social benefits for artists (social income support schemes like as the BKR, WIK, and WWIK) have been abolished, stipends for artists have been structurally cut, and the general level of cultural funding has still not recovered from the 2012 post-financial crash budget cuts. Although the national and local governments are still the biggest funders of the visual arts and the greatest hope of most artists and institutions, submitting a grant application or responding to an open call from a public art institution often feels like participating in a lottery (and

sometimes literally is). In this sense, patronage does not have a corrective or opposing function to public funding, but a symbiotic one. Government and patronage are the left and right hands of the same reputation economy. The ultimate expression of this symbiosis is the principle of match-funding: here, a public fund only supports a cultural initiative once it has proven itself on the market with, for instance, a successful crowdfunding campaign.

24 Public funding bodies that have participated in fund-matching include the Amsterdam Fund for the Arts (Amsterdams Fonds voor de Kunst), the provincial government of Limburg, the provincial government of Gelderland, Almere Cultural Fund (Cultuurfonds Almere), Groningen Art Board (Kunstraad Groningen), the Rotterdam municipal government, and the Mondriaan Fund. See: https://www.voordekunst.nl/paginas/donateurs/matchfunding.

25 See: https://www.voordekunst.nl/blog/in-totaal-meer-dan-28-miljoen-euro-opgehaald-voor-creatieve-projecten-door-middel-van-crowdfunding-en-matchfunding.

The Dutch platform Voordekunst is a good example. When it was founded in 2010, Voordekunst was the first non-profit cultural crowdfunding platform in the world. Like on any other crowdfunding platform, individuals (mostly from the creative's personal network) make small or mid-sized donations to cultural projects, and receive a nice goodie in return if the fundraiser is successful. To help achieve their funding goal, Voordekunst often matches individual creative with a cultural fund (usually but not always public), which agrees to contribute a substantial sum of money (around 25% of the total) in case the creative manages to raise approximately 75% of their goal. Fund-matching was involved in 3,337 of the 6,527 campaigns that have been successfully financed via Voordekunst.[24] In the fundmatching programme Long Live Giving (Leve het Geven), commissioned indirectly by the Dutch government, a sum of €260,000 was donated to more than 400 successful campaigns and set up in 2021 and 2022.[25] In practice, creative need to prove their eligibility for public funding with the

capacity to convince small donors. Public funds do not just accept, but reinforce the judgment of the crowd.

The merging function of private and public funding leads to an increasingly sharp contrast in the art field: on the one hand, a minority who stand out in the meritocratic machinations, and on the other, the large majority of deplorable have-nots. However sharp, the contradiction remains porous. In the reputation economy of stipends, awards, openings, and media coverage, of seeing and being seen, precarity can come and go at any time. Silvio Lorusso aptly summed up this situation in the slogan: "Everyone is an entrepreneur, no one is safe."[26] Patronage functions as a magical element in this constellation, juxtaposing the apparent calculability of entrepreneurship with the hope of the intrinsic and fundamentally inexplicable commitment of gifts.

26 Lorusso, *Entreprecariat*, 2019.

27 Lorey, `Governmental Precarization', 2011.

We can understand the symbiosis of different forms of public and private funding in the arts as sustaining the barely governable state that defines neoliberalism in general. Philosopher Isabell Lorey writes about this in *State of Insecurity: Governing the Precarious*:

> The counterpart of precarious is usually protection, political and social immunization against everything that is recognized as endangerment. [...] However, when domination in post-Fordist societies is no longer legitimated through (social) security, and we instead experience governing through insecurity, then the precarious and the immune, insecurity and security/protection, stand ever less in a relation of opposition and increasingly take on a graded relationship in terms of a regulated threshold of being (still) governable.[27]

The question of whether the welfare state is still salvageable or whether we need to develop new forms of subsistence security is not one I can answer here. However, I do think it is important to note that patronage as an enforcer of insecurity is an integral part of the neoliberal project. Occasional donations, as well as the hope for a magical moment of recognition, contribute to maintaining the (still) governable state of the cultural sector during the breakdown of collective security structures and the erosion of self-determination in the workplace.

A discussion on patronage can be conducted with nuance and understanding, with appreciation for generosity, and with an eye for the added value of gift culture. Yet, we will always have to face the fact that gift culture today is an enabler of the deconstruction of social welfare. Or perhaps it is better to look at things the other way around: patronage is currently being held hostage as a function of neoliberalism. In typical neoliberal style, public policy is creating an ever-increasing interpenetration and thus a mutual dependency between public and private. Now that patronage has become an integral part of neoliberal governance, it can hardly function as anything other than a neoliberal tool.

This current situation is, however, not an inevitable one. After all, patronage was big before the old liberalism emerged. Can we imagine patronage beyond neoliberalism?

THE POWER PATRON'S REVOLUTION

Much social unrest about the role of philanthropy is caused by the revolutionary actions of a small group of large philanthropists who consider themselves above the law, tax liability, and democratic processes. The ideology put forth by these power-hungry patrons is voiced by their puppets like Wim Pijbes, the director of the Droom & Daad fund that we encountered in the introduction. Pijbes has advocated for deregulation and more reliance on big money

to guard (national) culture and its standards of quality. He is no longer interested in matching government decisions and rejects what he calls "forced politically correct interpretations".[28] Power patrons want to return to "art as art is meant to be". And they seize the initiative to make that wish come true. By founding private museums or taking control of public institutions, they develop the urban environment single-handedly and shape the `Collection Netherlands' as they see fit.

28 Pijbes, `Vernieuwing bij musea is gebaat bij ruimte, niet bij regels', 2023.

29 Szreder, *The ABC of the Projectariat*, 2021.

30 Hendrikse, `Neo-illiberalism', 2018.

In *The ABC of the Projectariat*, Kuba Szreder diagnosed such toxic philanthropy "as blatant manifestations of the will to power, in [...] neoliberal guise".[29] However, I think the situation is even worse. The discourse of the power-hungry patron is neo-illiberal: an appeal to classical-liberal values from an elitist-autocratic and chauvinistic slant, with great distrust of the democratic control mechanisms of the liberal state.[30] These patrons are ridding themselves of the burden, imposed by neoliberal governments more than any other, that public art exhibitions should rely on private support. The revolution of the powerful patron is, therefore, in fact, a liberation of patronage from the grip of neoliberalism. (Publicly, most power-hungry patrons adhere to public values like diversity and inclusion. We should clearly understand this stance as an expression of populism and marketing rather than public accountability.) Yet it is quite likely that the philanthropic initiative will enter the publicly funded part of the visual arts sector through the back door and start competing for already scarce public resources. In this competition, the philanthropic initiative would have the advantage of private base funding. In an extreme but certainly conceivable scenario, the power-hungry patrons will take the lead in cultural policy, and it will be the government that will be fund-matching them.

Such a neo-illiberal revolution of power-hungry patrons will sideline the negotiations between traditional workers' and employers' representative organisations. Trade unions, collectives, committees, and professional and industry associations have no place at the table of the power-hungry patron. There can be no misunderstanding here: no powerful patron ever seeks union approval. The individual actions of the powerful patron thus undermine public control as well as workers' emancipation.

THE TOXIC PHILANTHROPY STRIKE

The appeal of a `new culture of giving' is obvious. As the welfare state collapses, philanthropy offers a fresh, positive vibe. It promises the thrill of a successful crowdfunding campaign or the grand opening of a new museum, made possible by you and me. Indeed, for some art workers and institutions, genuinely selfless gifts make the difference between being able to continue their work or having to quit. But in the bigger picture, the culture of giving we're developing is deeply reactionary. With the help of digital technologies and tax evasion, we try to revive an arts funding system that was historically instrumental in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, while, at the same time, the West slides back from liberal capitalism into feudalism, thanks to state-of-the-art technology and tax evasion. Patronage first helped birth the spirit of capitalism and now helps kill it. This full-circle moment is a five-century setback for art workers, who find themselves, once again, at the mercy of the ultrarich.

We can and probably should continue making tactical interventions, ensuring that art workers are prepared to deal with this reality and directing the biggest possible money flow toward the workers. But after years of trying, unsuccessfully, to cultivate a `productive' public debate, I feel like much of these efforts are in vain. In all honesty, debates about `ethical philanthropy' are too boring

and technical to get mass support and too soft to generate counter-power against the power patron. Our challenge demands stronger resistance.

Emanuele Braga, a comrade and core organiser behind the Institute of Radical Imagination, introduced me to the possibility of a toxic philanthropy strike. The idea is simple. One refuses toxic philanthropy, retracts one's labour from its production apparatus, and calls on other workers to do the same. A great example is the Strike Outset campaign. Outset is a multinational network of donors that funds art productions through public-private partnerships across `chapters' currently running in the UK, Israel, the Netherlands, Greece, Estonia, and India. Most productions Outset is involved in are high-quality experimental art, including performances and socially engaged works presented at prestigious public events and institutions. For instance, with the support of Outset NL in 2018, Matilde Cassani created the art piece *Tutto: Ordine e Disordine*, a literal eruption of confetti during Manifesta 12 in Palermo. Outset also supported the production of Alexis Blake's performance artwork *rock to jolt [ ] stagger to ash* in 2021 at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which was later awarded the Prix de Rome, the most prestigious contemporary visual arts prize in the Netherlands.

31 See: https://strikeoutset.org/what.

This is, once again, a classic case of art-washing, in which the exciting art hides a murky back-end operation. The Israeli chapter works with institutions aligned with the Israeli military, and its founders are closely linked to Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli surveillance industry, and a British far-right think tank.[31] After the 2023 ICJ court ruling that the Israeli Defence Forces are plausibly committing genocide in Gaza, a campaign was launched to strike Outset. The demand: "Until Outset Israel is closed, and all Outset's ties with Israeli apartheid are cut, we collectively refuse to work with Outset Contemporary Art Fund." Since it was launched, thousands of art workers have

joined the strike, leading to the resignation of Outset's founding director. Yet at the time of writing, in October 2025, the Israeli chapter of Outset is still operational, so Strike Outset is still going strong.

Like any strike, the philanthropy strike offers an amazing feeling of relief and power when workers realise that they can say `no', together. The true beauty of the philanthropy strike, however, is its productive promise. If arts philanthropy is the negation of the neoliberal state, the toxic philanthropy strike negates this negation without defending the neoliberal state, opening up a space to think and organise otherwise.

32 See: https://dutchartinstitute.eu/page/23276/anga-shares-a-communiqu%C3%A9-in-november-members-from-the-art-not.

33 The toxic philanthropy mapping workshop was hosted by Federica Timeto, Emanuele Braga, Marco Baravalle, Mao Mollona, and myself.

I experienced for the first time how powerful this can be during the Art Not Genocide Alliance Congress in November 2024, a three-day event of art workers united in an effort to permanently close down the Israeli pavilion in Venice.[32] The congress took place in Morion, a Venetian social center and squat, which has stood in the heart of the global art world capital, proudly defying capital and corruption, for the past 30 years. The programme included a synergetic mix of on-site initiatives against toxic philanthropy, such as the boycott organisers of PACBI and Strike Germany, people proposing new models of redistribution like Dayra and Collecteurs, and a toxic philanthropy mapping workshop by the Institute of Radical Imagination.[33] The most inspiring and strategically relevant contribution, however, came through the ether, as an online presentation of the Owneh Initiative. Owneh is a coalition of Palestinian civil organisations that "seeks to break away from the colonial funding system and gain independence of Palestinian civil society organizations from outside interference." After October 2023, it organised print sales and other fundraisers to support Palestinian culture directly,

but also created a `Resource Basket'. With this pot of money, they are able to (symbolically) compensate people and organisations who reject toxic philanthropic money. If one can reject toxic philanthropy, but still be able to pay next month's rent, solidary action obviously becomes a much more attractive option. The gift from Owneh's resource basket plays a crucial role, transforming solidarity from a solitary sacrifice into a shared responsibility. This is what I consider the productive promise of the philanthropy strike: a bottom-up, organised, democratic liberation of patronage may still be possible. We can turn the gift against toxic philanthropy and build our own new culture of giving.

34 This is the case for Dayra, as explained in the chapter *Transvaluation Tactics*.

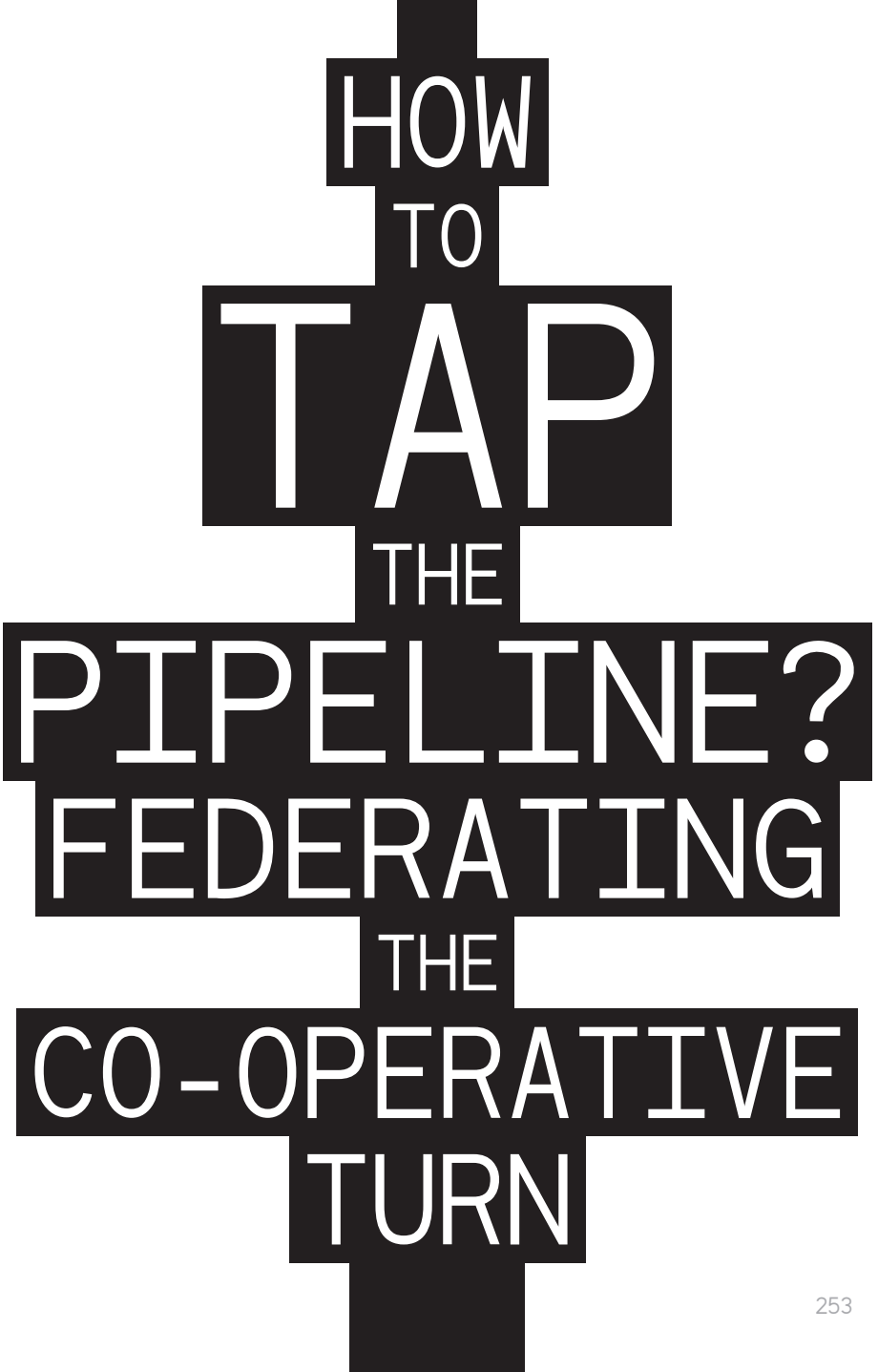
35 For instance, after decades of working with the Arts Collaboratory and experimenting with trust-based funding, Stichting DOEN has formulated leading questions for "a funding paradigm shift", which I believe is a very healthy discussion to have. See: https://cms.doen.nl/uploads/ac-publication-web-2.pdf.

The question is, of course, how a new culture of solidarity-based giving can be financially sustainable. Some put their hopes in trust-based funding or exchange of community wealth in the absence of money, for instance, in the form of a credit cooperative.[34] There are also ongoing efforts to pirate or redirect existing philanthropic money flows. But, to me, the most interesting form is the notion of dues-based funding. In this framework, the gift is transformed from a chivalrous gesture (philanthropy) into an honourable fulfilment of collective responsibilities (reparations). It's easy to imagine a counter-philanthropy union or association that collects periodic dues and redistributes based on co-operative principles. As a great example of a standing practice, we might look at Het Actiefonds, which connects small-time patrons to global actions for social justice and creates a bridge of solidarity. Thus, tactical action can result in new forms of

giving – decentralised, collective, anonymous, communal, and solidary. This, in turn, provides a testing ground for new ethical principles, political visions, and forms of organising.[35]

HOW SHOULD OUR APPROACH TO COMMUNITY- AND COMMONS-BASED ART PRACTICES SHIFT IF WE WANT TO FOREGROUND ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY?

WITH ROEL GRIFFIOEN


HOW
TO
TAP
THE
PIPELINE?
FEDERATING
THE
CO-OPERATIVE
TURN

What media theorists and sociologists in the 2020s referred to as the `aestheticization of capitalism' is complete. Cultural life has largely migrated into various virtual platforms, all controlled by the Big Two technology corporations. [...] This has left art institutions vulnerable to being seen as entirely irrelevant with the widespread introduction of neural aesthetic response production (NARP) technology, in its first years already close to universally embraced. Once the biological interface with artificial intelligence (AI) made it easy to directly plug into and stimulate the brain with personally tailored aesthetic experiences at low cost, there was no credible reason for most cultural consumers to want anything else. [...] NARP-style aesthetic experience provides more than enough on the entertainment level for both the tiny ruling class and its proximate servant class. But exactly because NARP has been so efficient at satisfying the creative demands of so many people on such a wide scale, this experience of art does not fulfill the classical art object's remaining purpose: symbolizing, through its uniqueness, a ruling class's status atop the social pyramid of society. The individual contemporary artist, therefore, lives on, but more in the mode of aesthetic lifestyle coaching and bespoke mythmaking. A small number of artists have assumed a new place, woven into the private life of the upper echelon of a mainly self-isolated ruling class. For a certain set, having a personal artist has become a service similar to having a personal trainer or chef. [1]

1 Davis, *Art in the After-Culture*, 2022, pp. ix-x.

The above is an excerpt from a 2037 report of the Future Arts Alliance, cited by Ben Davis in the prologue of *Art in the After-culture.* We could call this report fictional. But it might be more accurate to describe it as a lucid extrapolation of contemporary cultural politics. In the previous chapters of this book, we have seen that there are many alternatives to the art economy's `Big Squeeze': from self-organised redistribution to new social unions, and from basic income campaigns to collective demands for payment. But, entering the last chapter, we must confront an uncomfortable question. What if the world is *not* developing in the direction we wish for? What if it is, in fact, going the opposite way?

2 Steyerl, *Duty Free Art*, 2016; Olma, `An-Aesthetic Autonomy', 2025.

Let's take a step back and recap the trends we have noticed. Over the past thirty years, public infrastructures for arts and culture in the undead welfare states of the global North have been systematically hollowed out as part of a broader shift of public resources, institutions, and infrastructure into the private domain. After waves of `professionalisation' in the 1980s and 1990s and austerity measures dominating the 2000s and 2010s, the most recent shift has been a pivot towards philanthropy. With the rise to power of authoritarians around the world and the redirection of tax money towards the weapon industry, the erosion of public funding for culture has further accelerated. A growing number of cultural institutions, therefore, rely on private benefactors and corporate sponsors. More and more collectors are building private museums or acquiring formerly public venues, while commercial developers promote `cultural spaces' as attractive features in real estate projects. Meanwhile, artworks circulate silently as speculative, an-aesthetic assets in freeports – customs-exempt storage facilities where cultural objects become indistinguishable from capital.[2] Still, the cohort of precarious art workers continues to grow, as art academies

continuously churn out graduates, seemingly unconcerned about their professional futures. Furthermore, `disruptions' in the digital realm, like the rise of generative AI and the centralisation of online retail, make legacy income models for art workers increasingly unreliable. Each of these developments reinforces the sense that the public-private pipeline is not only dominant but inevitable. It is tempting to conclude that every `alternative' is a mere blip and that the best we can do is to embrace a kind of tactical opportunism.

But is it so? Around us, today, we see a development that is both hopeful and grounded – concrete enough to enable real change, yet politically charged enough to resist neutralisation. It aligns with the prevailing trend of privatisation, but, perhaps surprisingly, also pushes back against it. We argue that this development, which we will tentatively refer to as `the cooperative turn', offers a possible response to the current crisis in public cultural infrastructure. If we can prevent it from becoming a vehicle for further privatisation or social fragmentation, two potential pitfalls that we discuss further on in the chapter, the cooperative turn may serve as a model for renewed redistribution. At stake is the possibility for collective action and exchange, independent of the unreliable state and free from market domination.

THE WORLD OF COMMUNITIES: CO-OPERATIVES ON THE RISE

The Afrikaanderwijk Cooperative in Rotterdam-Zuid began as a local community art initiative in one of the city's most diverse yet impoverished working-class neighborhoods. Founded by Stichting Freehouse – an organisation initiated by artist Jeanne van Heeswijk – the co-operative started modestly: by pairing artists with market traders to help make their stalls more appealing and reinvigorate the local market. This creative intervention quickly evolved into a more ambitious venture, including a catering company

that now employs people from twelve different countries, and which, notably, has operated without subsidies since 2011.

Afrikaanderwijk Co-operative operates from the Gemaal op Zuid building in Rotterdam, where local programmers organise exhibitions, musical performances, and other cultural activities.

Afrikaanderwijk Co-operative operates from the Gemaal op Zuid building in Rotterdam, where local programmers organise exhibitions, musical performances, and other cultural activities. Picture by Cem Altınöz.

A turning point came in 2015 with the adoption of the `right to challenge', a principle imported by the municipality of Rotterdam from the UK that allows civic initiatives to compete with government agencies to perform public tasks. Through this legal mechanism, the co-operative succeeded in taking over waste collection from the municipality of Rotterdam.[3] What had previously been a one-way flow of public capital out of the neighbourhood – toward private contractors – was redirected back in. Public money was no longer leaking to external businesses; instead, it was being insourced into a local, solidarity-based economy.

3 See: https://wijkcooperatie.org/en/profit/right_to_challenge.

Since then, the co-operative has expanded its services into cleaning, landscaping, bicycle repair, sewing, event space rental, and consultancy, providing paid work to over 150 residents. It handles commissions from the prestigious Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, and runs a `resource station' that repurposes market waste into materials for local artists and designers. The Arikaanderwijk Co-operative is also the only worker co-operative in the Netherlands running a long-term cultural programme. Eight in-house programmers from the neighbourhood curate an international cultural programme of music, performances, and visual art. As part of the co-operative's activities, this culture is not just *for* but also *of* the people in the neighbourhood.

4 De Moor, *Homo Cooperans*, 2013.

5 Ziegler and Gautier, *Een wereld van gemeenschappen,* 2023); De Boer and Van der Lans, *DEcentraal*, 2014.

6 Lengkeek and Kuenzli, *Operatie Wooncoöperatie*, 2022, pp. 5-18.

7 Pfister, `COVIVEMA 5', 2020.

8 Delz, Hehl, Ventura, eds. *Housing the Co-op*, 2020.

9 ICA, `Cooperative Identity, Values & Principles', n.d.

10 Idem.

11 See the work of the Platform Co-operativism Consortium, Scholz, *Own This*, 2023, and Scholz and Lovink, *The Art of Free Cooperation*, 2007.

The Afrikaanderwijk Co-op reminds us that the flow of money is not governed by natural law, it can be redirected, disrupted, or reimagined. It is a practical demonstration of how civic structures can reclaim public value and reshape economic circulation.

As such, it illustrates a trend that historian Tine De Moor has dubbed the return of the *homo cooperans*: citizens increasingly taking over collective ownership of services once managed by the state or market.[4] Across Europe, examples abound – energy cooperatives, collective sick-leave funds, self-managed community centres, and housing co-ops. Together, they form an ecology of horizontally organised initiatives described by researchers as a `world

of communities' or a `do-it-yourself society'.[5] In Zürich, for instance, over 20% of property is owned by co-ops, keeping living costs low through shared ownership and governance.[6] The Miethaüser Syndikat, a revolving fund supporting housing co-ops in Germany, finances cooperative purchases or property development and ensures that properties are permanently removed from the speculative market. Contrary to the idea that co-operative housing is only viable in affluent European societies, such housing quadrupled in Uruguay between 2005 and 2020. Backed by government loans, technical support, and legal frameworks, these co-ops now house 3% of Montevideo's population and offer serious relief from the stringent housing shortage.[7] Members contribute equity through savings or manual labour, enabling the construction of nearly 16,000 units in 15 years. The book *Housing the Co-op* highlights this and similar initiatives in countries like Ethiopia, China, Brazil, and the U.S.[8]

What these co-operative initiatives in different domains and parts of the world have in common is that their rules and maintenance are determined from the bottom up – by the participants themselves. According to the definition of the International Cooperative Alliance, co-ops are "autonomous association[s] of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise".[9] They are often rooted locally, but also operate in networks and federations with the principle of "cooperation among cooperatives".[10] With the rise of digital media, these translocal connections have further developed into the concrete ambitions of `platform co-operativism', aiming to offer an alternative to the dominant platform corporations.[11] Thus, more than a legal entity, the co-operative is a form of value-based, anti-speculative, even anti-capitalist organisation.

The emergence of a `world of communities' is clearly a positive development, but it should be noted that in much of Europe, this is closely linked to the restructuring

– and radical curtailing – of the welfare state. For instance, data from the Netherlands show a sharp rise in co-operatives in the years directly following the 2008 financial crisis.[12] As services and regulations in healthcare, education, housing, and culture – once pillars of the welfare state – were slashed, people increasingly had to rely on themselves and one another. Or put differently: as the state absolved itself of responsibilities, the space for `citizen power' increased. Participation in the do-it-yourself society, as we already noticed in the chapter on fair practice policy, often means little more than filling the void left by power.

FROM COMMONS TO CO-OPS: FOREGROUNDING THE MONEY QUESTION

The `world of communities' is prominently present in art and culture, too. The field is known for its high degree of self-organisation, often borne from practical need, and there is much interest in the organisation of culture beyond market and state. A torrent of publications, seminars, educational programmes, and exhibitions explore collectivity, reciprocity, sustainability, and the commons. Over the past decade, the concept of the commons – and the practice of commoning – has become central in discussions on socially engaged art. This trend can be traced back to two crucial developments.

12 De Moor, *Homo Cooperans*, 2013.
13 De Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*, 2017.
14 Gentili and Mura, `The Birth of a Theater Commons in Rome', n.d.
15 Kentgens and Cramer, *Lumbung, Commons and Community Art*, 2023.

First was the rise of municipalist politics, which took on the law as a battleground to defend common resources. A pivotal moment in this development was the occupation of Teatro Valle. The public theatre in Rome, which had been shut down and privatised because of post-financial crisis budget cuts in 2010, was squatted by a group of actors,

musicians, directors, technicians, and creative staff in 2011, and turned into a `theatre commons'. `Communards', including paying members and volunteers, ran the programme and made collective decisions about management and finances. Teatro Valle Occupato was directly connected to the social movements of municipalist politics, and other post-financial crisis movements claiming that "omnia sunt communia" (all are common).[13] As Dario Gentili and Andrea Mura describe, the communards had an approach to law and policy that was both idealistic and pragmatic:

> The occupation [...] pioneered a new experimental approach to reconceptualizing law itself. By no longer fighting *against* the law, but *through* the law, the occupiers launched a battle for legal recognition of Teatro Valle as a commons, assisted by prominent legal theorists and by a working constituent assembly of the commons. Occupiers wished to distinguish their actions from traditional squatting; this would instead be a battle for the recognition of the commons through which existing legal tools would be emancipated from their familiar, more conservative uses.[14]

Between its occupation and the eventual eviction in 2014, Teatro Valle grew into an emblem for cultural commoning as a legal battle. A decade and a half later, commoning is still a big topic in socially engaged art and culture. In 2017, Casco Art Institute in Utrecht renamed itself Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons, a name it operates under up to the present day. `Lumbung', which was introduced by ruangrupa as the central organising theme of documenta fifteen in 2023, can be loosely translated as `commons'.[15] Some commentators even proclaim that `commonism' is the leading ideology of cultural communality today.[16] This larger framework encompasses two ideological polarities, between which most art commons navigate: practical modes of self-government based on the empirical research

of Elinor Ostrom, on the one hand, and more subversive, anti-institutional practices associated with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's notion of the `undercommons' on the other.[17] These different approaches sometimes create antagonisms and surprising hybrids, but they haven't led to any fundamental ruptures within the scene of commons-minded art workers.

Teatro Valle Occupato in action, pictured by an anonymous photographer.

The art commons development amplified and mixed with practices of commoning in the media art scene, where it had emerged as a response to the crisis of copyright posed by the internet. "At the turn of the millennium," Felix Stalder writes in the book *From Commons to NFTs*, everybody was "talking about, and busy creating, commons and articulating ideas of communal property and free sharing".[18] Many net artists were involved in the F/LOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software) and copyleft movements, and some of the major shadow and pirate libraries like Memory of the World, Ubuweb, and Monoskop were created as art-adjacent initiatives. Art-world

commoning and digital media commoning developed as largely independent trajectories, reacting to different sets of urgencies, but meetings of the two often turned into interesting encounters. In 2016, Geert Lovink speculated that a synthesis of the two traditions could amount to the "avant-garde of the commons": a strong network of designers, coders, and artists capable of reprogramming social, technical, and material relations together.[19]

16 Gielen and Dockx, eds. *Commonism*, 2018.

17 To compare these ideological strands, see Ostrom, *Governing the Commons*, 1990, on the one hand, and Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 2013, on the other.

18 Stalder, *From Commons to NFTs*, 2022, p. 7.

19 Lovink, `Before Building the Avant-Garde of the Commons', 2016.

Taking stock of the commons boom, a decade after its inception, one thing stands out. The self-organisation, self-management, horizontal organisation, and alternative democratic models have led to a surprisingly low degree of collective institutionalisation, especially when compared to other domains affected by austerity, such as welfare, energy, and housing. In most cases, a practical outline for long-term economic redistribution remains lacking. Good intentions, therefore, often result in small-scale, one-off redistributions of project funding. The bottleneck is not an insufficient amount of activities, nor a lack of political interest in the organisation of art beyond market and state, but the fact that most commoning practices get stuck on the level of governance questions.

In 2024, the Belgian artist platform Jubilee organised a summer school titled *From Commons to Coop*, suggesting that co-operatives are the logical next step after ten years of commoning in the arts. We love this suggestion and, with a touch of optimism, we suggest that the cooperative turn represents the next generation of art commons. It has the potential to give this discourse a concrete economic base while transforming it into a federated infrastructure. As institutions of collective action, co-operatives test

whether the often intangible rhetoric of reciprocity, mutuality, and shared ownership can be anchored in durable economic structures. The key issue is not so much to foreground legal forms, but, simply, money. We're very good at consensus and self-organised redistribution. But what is the money we redistribute, and where does it come from?

These are not rhetorical questions. They are urgent – especially as cultural policy continues to favour market logic and private investment. We must therefore ask: how might the principles of the commons be materially implemented in economically sustainable ways? Can the arts sector forge new institutional forms that resist the drain of public value and re-root capital in shared infrastructures? And what role can artists, cultural workers, and civic actors play in building these resilient, post-neoliberal models? In the following paragraphs, we present examples of cultural co-operatives to reflect on the opportunities and challenges the model offers for self-organisation in the cultural and creative sector. We then offer critical reflections to counter overly romantic visions of a co-operative society. Moving beyond the public-private divide is perhaps possible, but what does it yield? What is the future we are working towards?

CULTURE CO-OPS IN ACTION

Even if there are not yet many co-operative cultural organisations, there is a slow, steady rise. There are co-operative studio spaces, workshops, and venues; neighbourhood initiatives that include cultural programming (like the Afrikaanderwijk Co-operative); and co-operative galleries, cultural service providers, and arts organisations. It is in the nature of co-operatives to be unique, since they are based on the (local) needs and abilities of members. Still, it is possible to discern templates or models of activity, each with its own benefits and problems, which makes it worthwhile to take a closer look at some exemplary cases.

Autonomic Co-operative is a collective of twelve people around the world, offering a range of digital design and development services. From setting up a website to custom app development, and from music production to bespoke cloud hosting, Autonomic can do it. That is to say, if you pay fairly and meet the co-operative's `ethical guidelines'. Autonomic prefer to work for activists, unions, and autonomous organisations, and reject clients in the military industries, fast fashion, and fossil industries. They work with open source software and make sure to feed upgrades and innovations they develop back into the digital hivemind. Thus, being a client of Autonomic is an inherent contribution to the digital commons.

20 For the background story of DisCO Co-op, see Troncosco in conversation with Gloerich, `Neoliberalism Is a Game We Did Not Consent to,' 2025.

There are more worker co-operatives like Autonomic. For instance, the Portuguese design studio KickVoidLoöp offers UX and UI design, art direction, brand identity development, illustration, web development, copywriting, and more. The larger and more diverse the group of co-operative members, the more encompassing the services offered by the co-operative become. Within the co-op, competitors become collaborators, offering services none of them could have offered alone. Another interesting example is Guerrilla Translation, a worker co-operative of translators working between English, Spanish, German, alongside many other languages. Guerrilla Translation translates for professional organisations, but also does pro bono work (which they call `lovework'), like voluntary translations of activist materials. The co-operative structure ensures that both the work that is valued by the capitalist market and the work that is not are equally and fairly remunerated. The positive experience of Guerrilla Translation led co-founder Stacco Troncosco to set up DisCO Co-op, short for Distributed Cooperatives, "a friendly and carefully planned approach for organisations that want to create and share value in

ways that are cooperative, commons-oriented and rooted in feminist economics".[20] DisCO offers to teach and implement the model for radical workplace democracy, using the worker co-op as the legal form, so we might see many more of them emerge in the near future.

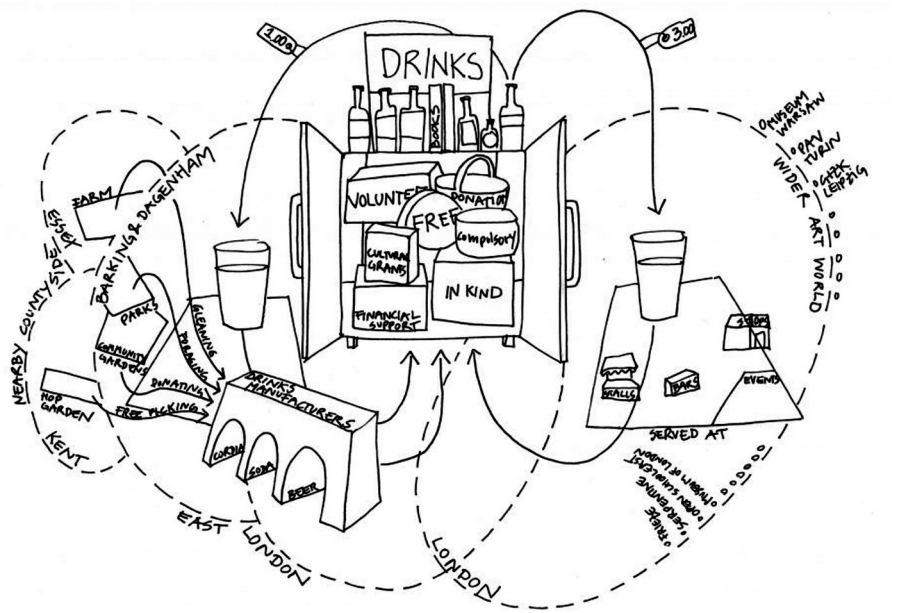


Illustration by Kahtrin Böhm of CompanyDrinks's experimental distribution scheme, between Barking and Dagenham (London) and the global art world.

As these examples show, worker co-operatives function well when they offer products or services that a collective can make better than individuals. Maybe it highlights the collective authorship that was always-already there anyway. The model also helps ensure worker democracy and anchors the economic activities in shared political and social values. The co-operants get to fully design and control the money flows together. However, there are some limitations of the worker co-op, too. The model does not exist outside of the market. It is rather a way

to enter the market collectively. So, while part of their activities may be non-lucrative, the total of the co-operative's operations must amount to an economically `healthy' mix. That can work for web design and translation, but what about art? Some art practices may be integrated into the construct of co-operative economic activities. For instance, Afrikaanderwijk Co-operative employs an artist who turns market waste into syrups, jams, and other experimental foods. Another good example is CompanyDrinks. The cooperatively run social enterprise, set up as a community art project in the UK, manufactures juices and sodas from locally grown and picked fruits, and uses these to experiment with diverse economies. The artistic practice, here, is the construction of social and economic realities with a co-operatively run enterprise being the medium. In the case of more traditional art practices, the scale benefits of the co-operative might help secure large-scale (public) commissions, like decorating a new public hospital. But, ultimately, the unavoidable question is: what kind of artistic practices are excluded from the co-operative? And who, if not the market or the state, gets to decide on this?

Some co-operatives focus on creating better conditions to sell products together. A good example is the phenomenon of co-operative bookshops. Groups of people, typically local book lovers, collectivise to open bookshops or save them from bankruptcy because they feel that the social, cultural, and economic function of the bookshop around the corner is too valuable to let it disappear. The scalability of co-operative book sales is proven by Tertulia, an online co-operative bookstore, which offers cheap books to reading members using bulk discounts. We could also imagine that hybrids of these local shops and platforms could work, in which a federated network of co-operative shops would share a back office and scale up together. Although more marginal, co-operative shops exist on the art market, too. In the US, there is a widespread phenomenon of co-operative art galleries. Some are

collectives of artists playing the market segment underneath the blue-chip galleries, self-organise to save the 50% overhead fee, which is the standard cut of the gallery owner. Most, however, are local craft shops offering decorative objects to tourist audiences; `difficult art', including socially engaged and community art, could never find an audience in these galleries.

21 Blaasse, `Collective Artists' Studios or a Lack of Government Policy?', 2023.

22 Mudu, `Resisting and Challenging Neoliberalism', 2014.

A more clearly anti-commercial plan can be found in co-operative real estate ownership and governance. Take, for example, Level Five Co-operative, a lively community of cultural practitioners in Brussels. The organisation rents temporarily vacant buildings and turns them into affordable studio spaces. Tenants automatically become members of the collective that decides over the space management, budget, and central activities, including a radio programme and a series of screening nights. Part of every studio's rent price is a chunk of 30 euros per month, which is distributed between overhead, a programme budget, and savings toward the eventual possibility of acquiring real estate collectively. Using temporary artist studios for vacant property management is not a unique phenomenon. On the contrary, as discussed in the chapter *Payment for Art Work*, culture is an internationally popular tool of gentrification. But by introducing co-operative principles, Level Five places art workers in the driver's seat instead of the usual apparatchiks. Thus, the collective use of space turns it into a world-building medium. In the words of Level Five co-founder Rori Ritzen: "This, to me, is the potential of Level Five: proposing another way of organizing the arts. In doing so, we change ourselves and hopefully also the world – and art world – in which we operate."[21] Similar new initiatives include Index Space in New York and Post-Office in Amsterdam, a space co-operatively run by cultural workers as a prototype for collective futures.

Following the logic of the Mithaüser Syndikat discussed above, the acquisition of co-operative real estate for cultural work can be easily understood as a gradual abolishment of private property. As non-profit cultural spaces, these co-ops ideally benefit both the art workers and the communities they are located within. A great example of this strength is the phenomenon of `centri sociali' in Italy: co-operatively run (former) squats where cultural activities seamlessly merge with political activism, social movements, community kitchens, and other functions that benefit the local community.[22] But to be fair, the reality of co-operative spaces is often less rosy. To establish co-operative ownership, good relations with local governments are often helpful. At the very least, one needs legal know-how and lots of time. And once permanent community ownership or governance is established, questions of access and entitlement soon emerge. In practice, therefore, real estate co-ops are often islands of privilege. It then becomes hard to distinguish the abolishment of private property from carefully gatekept tribal space, or placemaking for the common good from gentrification. Still, it is possible.

At least one great example exists to show what a long-term, locally rooted, accessible, vibrant, and economically stable cultural co-operative can look like: Friche la Belle de Mai, or La Friche for short, in Marseille. La Friche is an enormous former industrial building, which houses 70 cultural organisations and provides over 400 artists with rent-free studios. It includes a gym (free for residents of the neighbourhood), a restaurant, five concert venues, shared gardens, a bookshop, a crèche, 2400 m2 of exhibition space, an 8000 m^2 roof terrace, and – as per request of local youth – a skatepark. It makes money by hosting about 600 events yearly, with nearly half a million visitors in total. All 400 people working at La Friche are members of the co-operative that runs the place, alongside neighbours and city officials. La Friche has existed since the 1980s and is not going anywhere, making it a real, long-term shared

resource for visitors, users, workers, and the neighbourhood. And while the local government is supportive, the community is, once again, in the driver's seat.

The rooftop terrace of La Friche.
Picture by Caroline Dutrey.

BEYOND PLAN B: CAVEATS TO A HOPEFUL DEVELOPMENT

In discussing the examples above, we emphasised the practical, logistical, and organisational functioning of certain cooperative models. Here, we want to take a step back to zoom out and critically examine the horizon of the cooperative turn itself. What kind of future is being envisioned?

An important, though uncomfortable, question is to what extent the `cooperative turn' truly offers a radical substitute to the large-scale shift of resources, institutions, and infrastructure from the public to the private sector. After the 2008 financial crisis, George Caffentzis

highlighted the compatibility between Nobel Prize Winner Elinor Ostrom's economic theory of the commons and mainstream capitalist market thinking, and argued that the commons might well be neoliberalism's `Plan B'.[23] This question applies to cooperatives, too. Are they building blocks of a solidarity economy, as is argued in left-leaning theory, or should one contend that the cooperative turn is not so much a break from neoliberalism, but rather an extension of the progressive commodification of culture?

23 George Caffentzis, `The Future of "The Commons"', 2010.

After all, in many instances, a cooperative is not an entity separate from the market but, as we saw in the examples discussed above, a means to enter the market collectively. In most countries, cooperatives are treated as businesses under the law – though, unlike conventional firms, the emphasis is not on profit maximisation but on achieving a particular goal, which can, in fact, be social in nature. It should give pause for thought about the co-op's disruptive potential that even institutional flagships of our world order, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, are promoting the cooperative model – the latter even christened 2025 the Year of the Co-operative.

The question then becomes: who would be alarmed by a vision of a cultural sector where individuals and institutions organise themselves into small businesses, becoming less reliant on public funding and integrating into the `free' market? Certainly, not the proponents of privatisation. In many ways, we're fulfilling the long-held dream of the austerity prophets who've spent over a decade preaching that artists, cultural creators, and institutions should stand on their own two feet. Our vision for a future cooperative sector needs to have more substance – to offer something different to a tidy, market-friendly solution; to confront neoliberal wishful thinking head-on; to take offence.

A second fundamental reservation about the cooperative turn is the issue of how it relates to the democratic fabric of society. Co-operatives, by definition, draw a

boundary between members and non-members. Members participate in internal democracy; non-members (users, consumers, visitors, outsiders) do not. Another important issue is where to draw that boundary in cultural co-operatives. One risk is that co-ops replicate existing networks, which often consist of like-minded people of similar age, income, and lifestyle – typically with ample social capital. As a result, co-operatives can foster `tribalism', in the sense that it only extends solidarity to peers.[24] A paradox can thus arise, where the internal democracy of a co-op is neatly safeguarded by a functioning governing model, while as a whole the co-operative, as an enclave of sameness, contributes to further social fragmentation. Membership in a co-operative often comes with access to scarce resources and opportunities. Which raises another, overlapping concern: Who decides who deserves access? In a cultural landscape envisioned as an archipelago of co-operatives, do the gatekeepers – those who have the power to decide who may join – hold disproportionate power?

24 Sennett, *Together*, 2021; Griffioen, *Plaats vergaan*, 2024.

25 See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_childcare_benefits_scandal.

A legitimate counterpoint concerns how `blind' welfare infrastructures really are, or were. Public systems also have boundaries. In Dutch public housing, one's ethnic or cultural background could influence where you are placed. The `Toeslagenaffaire' in the Netherlands revealed that public systems can systematise discrimination.[25] And in the public cultural sector, significant power often rests with bureaucratic gatekeepers. Still, public institutions possess a scale and reach that grassroots initiatives struggle to match.

Moreover, we must abandon the romanticism surrounding the do-it-yourself society and the world of communities. Commons and co-operatives are not inherently progressive or benevolent. Especially as it is not only leftist artists and biodynamic hobbyists who create collective institutions in the vacuum left by the retreating

state. Fascists do, too. In some cases, with greater speed and effectiveness. A case in point is Italy's fascist squatter movement CasaPound, which runs activist neighbourhood centres including solidarity networks, community kitchens, bookstores, and childcare. We must anticipate that the future may bring more collective institutions rooted in exclusion and social disintegration.

The question, then, is not whether public systems are perfect – they are not – but whether bottom-up co-operatives and top-down institutions can be made to complement one another rather than compete. If the fetishisation of small-scale initiatives can lead to fragmented enclaves of homogeneity, and if large-scale public systems can become impersonal, exclusionary, and bureaucratically rigid, then the challenge is to imagine a middle ground. What we need are robust hybrid structures: frameworks that connect and empower small-scale, community-led initiatives while ensuring broader accessibility, accountability, and equity.

This, perhaps, is the holy grail: a new institutional architecture in which cooperative forms are not isolated islands, but nodes in a broader public ecosystem. An infrastructure in which cultural commons are not merely imagined, but materially supported. Linked by policy, upheld by law, and sustained through shared investment. Rather than accepting privatisation and philanthropy as the only responses to the crisis of the public realm, we might begin to see the cooperative turn in cultural production as a way to tap the pipeline differently. Not to siphon resources into private hands, but to re-route them toward shared, durable, and democratic infrastructures. Co-operatives can contribute to the fragmentation of society, but as part of a new institutional architecture, they can also offer a glimpse of a restored public realm. Not as a top-down apparatus, but as a living, participatory commons built through shared ownership, mutual responsibility, and cultural solidarity.

APPENDIX

GLOSSARY OF IMPORTANT PRACTICES

There are many and real alternatives to the broken art economy. This glossary gives an overview of more than 150 initiatives, models, collectives, and organisations, both historical and contemporary, that somehow redefine the social and economic rules of the art world.

A Modest Proposal.
An ongoing artistic project by Vermeir & Heiremans started in 2018. The proposal is that public art institutions agree to create a financial product based on their art collections, real estate, and symbolic capital. Profits generated by trading the financial product are distributed using an `automated dividend' that creates a cycle of wealth benefiting investors and institutions, as well as the creators of these values, the original stakeholders – the artists and art workers.
→ Also see *Vermeir & Heiremans.*

A-Corp.
A creative business model launched by Yancey Strickler in collaboration with digital payment operator Stripe. It offers the possibility to redistribute proceeds of sales among (creative) collaborators, much like the traditional cooperative enterprise model, adding the functionality of automating distribution protocols. The A-Corp model is operational in the online art shop Metalabel.

Het Actiefonds.
A Dutch fund that supports social movements and action groups all over the world. It mainly gets its money from small-time patrons. The donations are not framed as philanthropic gifts, but as voluntary taxation. This form of reparations is based on proposals by the Non-Aligned Movement.

Afrikaanderwijk Co-operative.
A neighbourhood worker co-operative in Rotterdam-Zuid, founded as an artistic project, which runs a community centre and cultural program. Its commercial services include cleaning, landscaping, bicycle repair, sewing, event space rental, consultancy, and resource and

waste upcycling, providing paid work to over 150 residents.

Art for UBI campaign.
→ see *Institute of Radical Imagination.*

Art Not Genocide Alliance (ANGA).
An informal, international coalition of art workers united in an effort to permanently close down the Israeli pavilion in Venice in response to the genocide in Gaza.
→ Also see *PACBI*.

Art Workers' Coalition.
An open coalition of artists, filmmakers, writers, critics, and museum staff, established in New York in 1969. They introduced the constructivist notion of the `art worker' to the West and campaigned for better working conditions for artists, notably by publishing a list of 13 demands in 1969/1970.

Art Workers Italia (AWI).
An autonomous and non-partisan association, created in 2020 to give a voice to contemporary art workers in Italy. AWI collaborates with experts in the legal, fiscal, and administrative sectors, with research institutes and universities, and with art and cultural institutions, to build ethical, contractual, and legal tools to protect art workers.

Arte Útil.
A long-term project on `useful art', started in 2013 by artist Tania Bruguera in collaboration with the Queens Museum in New York and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. It collects examples of cultural and social action that introduce new methods and social formations to deal with issues that were once the domain of the state.

The Artist as Debtor.
→ see *Debt strike*.

Artist's Federation.
A core faction of revolutionaries within the Paris Commune of 1871, the socialist government that controlled the city for two months. They promoted art as a `communal luxury' and called for the `universal suffrage of artists'.

Arts Collaboratory.
Potentially the most important network of contemporary art institutions that you've never heard of, founded by Casco Art Institute in 2013. The Arts Collaboratory is a community of 25 arts organisations, primarily from the Global South, which is committed to forging long-term, reciprocal relationships across borders. An important aspect of this collaboration is a jointly managed fund called the `common pot'. The lumbung community of documenta fifteen largely overlaps with the network of the Arts Collaboratory.
→ Also see *lumbung, ruangrupa,* and *Casco Art Institute*.

Arts of the Working Class (AWC).
A newspaper founded in 2018, circulating mainly in Berlin. It is a street journal similar to those found in most European cities, distributed to marginalised, mostly unhoused individuals who sell them and retain 100% of the proceeds. It features texts on art and society, packaged in beautiful graphic design, providing vendors with a product imbued with cultural cachet.

The Artist and the Others.
An NGO born in 2013, based in Maastricht and Munich. It helps artists and creatives build a sustainable career by organising projects, giving workshops, connecting people, and advocating for fair practices.

Artist Pension Trust (APT).
A failed international enterprise that promised to provide artists with a pension scheme. Participating artists would contribute one work of art every year to a common pool collection. These works were to be held in storage for several years, anticipating their value to rise in the meantime. They were then to be gradually sold over the course of 20 years for the benefit of the APT artists, providing them with future financial security. As the APT started malfunctioning, it became clear that the redistribution model was an art market scheme, which, in turn, appeared to be a data

aggregator that turned out to be a data aggregation blueprint.

Artists Union / Unemployed Artists Group (UAG).
A group of radical artists and writers in 1930s New York City that organised demonstrations and campaigned for the support of artists during the Great Depression. Their work resulted in the establishment of the large-scale Federal Arts Project, in which the state commissioned the production of public artworks.

Autonomic Co-operative.
A collective of twelve people around the world, offering a range of digital design and development services. They mainly work for activists, unions, and autonomous organisations, and they reject clients in the military industries, fast fashion, and fossil industries.

Bakunin's Barricade (2015-2022).
An artwork by Ahmet Öğüt in the collection of the Stedelijk Museum, based on a myth about the revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. It consists of a barricade of rubble and artworks and a contract in which the museum agrees to loan the Barricade to the Public in the Netherlands in order to be used as a barricade if these parties request this loan in the context of extreme economic, social, political, transformative moments. The Not Surprised Collective requested to loan the work during student protests in 2023 against the ongoing genocide in Palestine, to no avail.

Basic Income Earth Network (BIEN).
An NGO registered in the UK, advocating for the implementation of Basic Income around the world.
→ Also see *Universal Basic Income*.

Basic Income for the Arts (BIA).
A pilot scheme set up by the Irish government in 2022. 2000 artists were randomly selected to receive 325 euros per week for three years. The programme was initially set to run until 2025, but it was extended after initial

positive findings from the pilot's first year.

→ Also see *Universal Basic Income*.

BBK.
The Dutch professional association of visual artists. Emerged from the antifascist resistance movement in WWII, and successfully campaigned for the establishment of the Visual Arts Scheme.

→ Also see *Visual Arts Scheme.*

Beecoin.
An experiment in recording the community as an organisation, by symbolically reinforcing the relationships between humans and bees, and reconfiguring the relationships to our shared environments. Open-source sensing kits generate data from bee hives and a crypto-economic system redefines the inherent value of the reproduction of colonies. If the bees do well, the value of the crypto currency increases. Beecoin worked in tandem with BeeDAO, a web3 organisation run by bees and humans. Both were initiatives by the German art collective KUNSTrePUBLIK in collaboration with Haus der Statistik, Hiveeyes, Terra0, Moabees, and Nascent. Beecoin was launched at documenta fifteen.

→ Also see *lumbung*.

BKNL (Visual Arts Netherlands),
→ see *Dutch Artist Fee Guideline*.

Black Swan.
A Berlin-based collective pursuing horizontal and decentralised approaches to art making since 2018. Black Swan uses blockchain technology to experiment with peer-to-peer funding. They build an autonomous decentralised organisation (DAO) to redistribute decision-making power from a minority of collectors, gallerists, and curators to a plurality of artists embedded in niche scenes and milieux, and to enable emergent and non-canonical forms of creative practice to flourish.

Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement (B.H.A.A.A.D.).
A social union of inhabitants of East Los Angeles fighting artwashing, gentrification, and displacement.

→ Also see *Social unions.*

Broodfonds (bread fund).
A model of self-organised sick leave insurance between groups of up to 50 freelancers, mainly used in the Netherlands. People save up among themselves and pay out small gifts to each other to compensate for income lost due to illness.

Caveat,
→ see *Jubilee.*

CasaPound.
A network of fascist squats and social centres in Italy. Not all squatters are cool.

Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons.
A chronically precarious art space in Utrecht that is run as a commons and works for the commons. It co-developed the Climate Justice Code, set up the Arts Collaboratory, and is a core member of the lumbung community.
→ Also see *Arts Collaboratory* and *lumbung.*

Centre for Plausible Economies.
A platform for mapping and reimagining economic systems in the arts and beyond, founded by Kathrin Böhm and Kuba Szreder in 2018. It brought together artistic action and critical thinking to reclaim the economy.
→ Also see *CompanyDrinks*.

Cercle d'art des travailleurs de plantation congolaise (CATPC).
A co-operative in Lusanga, DRC, that develops economic initiatives based on the production and sale of critical art. It uses the art world economy to regenerate land and communities devastated by colonial plantation enterprises, especially the Dutch Unilever.

Circles Co-op.
A bottom-up experiment with unconditional basic income by artists, web3 developers, farmers and other local producers in Berlin between 2021 and 2023.
→ Also see *Universal Basic Income*.

Class of €524.988,07.
The graduation title of a class of graduating students at the St.Joost Academy of Art & Design in 2022. It refers to the collective student debt of the class.
→ Also see *Debt strike.*

Climate Justice Code.
→ see *Casco Art Institute.*

Collecteurs.
An online platform, a slow social medium, a museum of private collections, and a meeting place for artists, artwriters, collectors, and patrons. It is unapologetically entrepreneurial (because art workers need money to live), but also politicised in actions and text.

Common Coin.
A German NGO that tries to cultivate a new culture of giving.

Common Wallet.
A polyamorous relationship with money. Concretely, a group of people in Brussels who shared a single bank account for all of their income and expenses for several years.

CompanyDrinks.
The cooperatively run social enterprise CompanyDrinks, founded by Kathrin Böhm in rural England, manufactures juices and sodas from locally grown and picked fruits, and uses these to experiment with diverse economies.

Constructlab.
A transdisciplinary and transnational design-build network that brings together architectural concepts and construction. Breaking with traditional divisions of labour, combining the creative with the practical, the thinking with the doing.

Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY).
A privately funded basic income scheme for cultural workers in New York City. Between 2022 and 2024, 2400 artists received a guaranteed income of 1000 dollars per month for 18 consecutive months.
→ Also see *Universal Basic Income*.

Cube Cinema.
A cooperative, volunteer-run cinema in Bristol, UK.
→ Also see *RADMIN.*

Cultural Workers Unite.
A Rotterdam-based action group, organising bingo nights, workshops, and an Anti-Gentrification School.

CultureStake.
A quadratic voting system for local cultural grants, developed by Furtherfield. It was used to community-curate a cultural festival in Finsbury Park.
→ Also see *Furtherfield*.

Dayra.
A governance model to measure, share, and exchange the value of local resources in the absence of money, developed by The Question of Funding. Concretely, it is a record of debt within existing trust circles, accounted for on the blockchain, which empowers the balancing of complex debt exchange mechanisms within the community.
→ Also see *The Question of Funding*.

Debt strike.
Emerging in the US in the mid-2010s because of broad unrest about the debt economy (including art-world initiatives like the *Artist as Debtor* platform), the debt strike initiative grew into a movement to abolish rent, as well as student, and medical debt.

DisCO Co-op.
A friendly and carefully planned approach for organisations that want to create and share value in ways that are cooperative- and commons-oriented. It offers an organisational model and onboarding with workshops. Founded and run by Stacco Troncoso. The approach is operational in the cooperative enterprise Guerrilla Translation.

Discord.
Social platform developed for gamers. Used by almost all internet subcultures and scenes today.
→ Also see *Do Not Research*.

Do Not Research.
An influential internet culture Discord community founded and run by artist Joshua Citarella.

Droom & Daad.
A Rotterdam-based private philanthropic foundation of HAL (Holland America Line) investment company owner Martijn van der Vorm. Has donated almost a billion euros to charitable causes, including culture, while

the philanthropist dodges all taxes.

Dutch guideline for artist fees (kunstenaarshonorarium).
A grassroots payment guideline for artist fees in the Netherlands, developed by the sector-wide coalition BKNL and launched in 2017. The guideline is based on the Dutch minimum wage. Minimum fees are determined with a simple calculator. Compliance was adopted as an official funding requirement for public cultural funding in 2020.

Economic Space Agency.
A collective architecting infrastructures for postcapitalist networks. Approaching the economy as a design question, working intensively with Web3 technologies, and trying to hack the financialised economy in order to redirect capital away from capitalists. Their work is highly sophisticated and thought-provoking, but the models they develop have yet to be put into practical use.

European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP).
A multilingual platform for art, culture, and social theory, influential mainly between 2005 and 2015. It was renamed Transversal.

Fair Practice Code (FPC).
A document developed by the Dutch pro-culture lobby organisation Kunsten `92 in collaboration with workers and employers in the field, outlining conditions for fair employment practices. It includes fair payments, transparent contracting, `production chain responsibility', and more. It was initially inspired by the Belgian Fair Practice Label. The FPC was launched in 2017 and adopted as official government policy in 2020.
→ Also see Fair Practice Label.

Fair Practice Label.
The origin of `fair practice'-discourse in the arts. Conceived of by SOTA in Belgium as a tool to encourage self-regulation and public debate. The label would be a logo of a clover with four leaves, each

representing one aspect of fairness: ameliorating solidarity, ethical agreements, ecological consciousness, and diversity. Institutions and organisations would be able to separately apply for accreditation for each leaf of the fair practice label. Inspired by the W.A.G.E. Certification.

→ Also see *SOTA* and *Working Artists in the Greater Economy*.

Fairy Purse.
A speculative tool for fairer payment that combines collective and transparent self-assessment, flexible salary, and a shared bank account, developed within the *Reshape* project. Its goal is to enable redistribution but, more importantly, to engender a shared sense of fairness among participants.

→ Also see *Reshape*.

Federal Arts Project.

→ See, *Artists Union*.

Feral Art School.
An independent, co-operative art school in Hull looking to rewild creative communities. Offering affordable courses in printing and painting.

Feral Trade.
An online grocery business set up by artist and trader Kate Rich. A personal network of travelling (art world) friends and acquaintances acts as couriers transporting goods around Europe, and beyond.

→ Also see *RADMIN* and *Cube Cinema*.

Fossil Free Culture NL.
Action group that has successfully campaigned against the fossil industry sponsorship deals of Dutch cultural institutions. They developed the very effective tactic of disobedient art performances, staged inside the spaces of targeted institutions.

Foundational Economy Collective (FEC).
A loose collective of heterodox economists, mainly in the UK. The FEC conducts macroeconomic analyses of economies all around the

world to identify the `foundational economy'. The FEC's research shows that the tradable economy covers about 30 to 40% of the total economy in most countries. Imposing free market logic on the remaining 60 to 70% per cent is not only illogical, but it will simply not work.

Free/Slow University of Warsaw.
A nomadic centre of interdisciplinary studies, critical reflection, and independent thinking about art and society, founded in 2009 and dissolved about a decade later. Established by a group of curators to wrestle back time that was otherwise wasted on a relentless churn of artistic and academic projects and reflect upon the systemic conditions of artistic overproduction.
→ Also see *Office for Postartistic Services*.

Friche la Belle de Mai.
An enormous former industrial building in Marseille squatted in the 1980s. La Friche houses 70 cultural organisations, provides over 400 artists with rent-free studios, and includes a gym (free for residents of the neighbourhood), a restaurant, five concert venues, shared gardens, a bookshop, a crèche, 2400 m2 of exhibition space, an 8000 m2 roof terrace, and a skatepark. Friche la Belle de Mai makes money by hosting about 600 events yearly, with nearly half a million visitors in total. All 400 people working at La Friche are members of the co-operative that runs the place, alongside neighbours and city officials.

From Commons to Coop,
→ see *Jubilee.*

Furtherfield.
An art space and organisation with locations in Finsbury Park, London, and Felixstowe, Suffolk. It has been at the forefront of developments in radical web3 applications and, more broadly, questions of art and technology in eco-social change.
→ Also see *MoneyLab, CultureStake,* and *Treaty of Finsbury Park*.

GrantPA.
An online platform, launched in 2016, that uses technology

to match artists with grants and funding opportunities in a way that's easy, fast, and less intimidating. Unsurprisingly unsuccessful.

Green Ban strikes.
A strike movement of Australian construction workers in the 1970s, refusing to work on construction projects that would be socially or environmentally harmful.

IG Bildende Kunst.
Austrian association that represents the interests of visual artists in arts policy, social, economic, legal, and other professional matters. Has campaigned for (better) artist fees for years.

Index Space.
A centre for peer-led, public programming and the generous exchange of knowledge and ideas. Running two locations in New York City and supporting a global network of `nodes' with grants.
→ Also see *Post-Office*.

Institute of Network Cultures (INC).
Analyses and shapes the terrain of network cultures through events, publications, and online dialogue. INC projects evolve around urgent publishing, art and precarity, alternative revenue models, critical design and making, digital counter culture and more. It has a long tradition of creative industries critique (in the research projects *MyCreativity* and *Creative Reset*), and founded the research network *MoneyLab*. Based in Amsterdam.
→ Also see *MoneyLab*.

Institute of Radical Imagination (IRI).
A group of curators, artists, activists, and scholars with a shared interest in co-producing knowledge as artistic and political research interventions aimed at implementing post-capitalist forms of life in the Mediterranean and the Global South. They organised the School of Mutations, which resulted in the organisation of the Art for UBI campaign and the publication of the Art for

UBI manifesto. IRI is a member of L'internationale.

International Cooperative Alliance (ICA).
Independent association established in 1895, representing and serving cooperatives worldwide. Guardian of the cooperative identity, values, and principles.

International Strike of Artists.
A call by Yugoslavian artist Goran Djordjević in 1979, circulated with letters and postcards, urging artists in Europe and the US to go on strike. While some reacted positively, most artists refused.

L'Internationale.
A European confederation of museums, arts organisations, and universities, firmly positioned on the political left. It runs the Museum of the Commons program and the publishing platform L'Internationale Online. A guardian of the legacy of New Institutionalism.

Jubilee.
A platform for artistic research, run by a group of artists and other researchers, mainly in Belgium. Jubilee organised the 2024 summer school *From Commons to Coop* and led a research project on artist contracts, which resulted in the platform *Caveat*.

Juist Is Juist.
`What's right is right.' A Belgian platform that defines clear and fair principles and practices for collaborating in the arts sector, for all disciplines and for all parties involved.

Kickended.
An archive of Kickstarter's $0-pledged campaigns. Kickended is the place where campaigns with no backers live a second life. Free from the pressure of money raising, these retain the purity of abstract ideas. (By bringing to the fore crowdfunding projects with no backers, Kickended contributes to subvert the success bias produced at the level of both media storytelling and Kickstarter's ranking algorithms.) Kickended is a work by Silvio Lorusso.
→ Also see *Kickstarter*.

Kickstarter.
A crowdfunding platform for creative projects, founded by Yancey Strickler, Perry Chen, and Charles Adler in 2009. Many campaigns (mostly for games) have raised millions of dollars. Many other campaigns have raised nothing.
→ Also see *Kickended*.

KickVoidLoöp.
A co-operative Portuguese creative agency. It offers a broad range of services, from graphic design to web development and copywriting.

Kin Arts Almanac.
A living publication by State of the Arts, including useful tools and reflections for organising (collective) cultural practices better.
→ Also see *SOTA*.

Kunst = solidair.
Art = Solidarity. The name and slogan of a Flemish campaign against cuts to the cultural budgets, organised by State of the Arts in 2020.
→ Also see *SOTA*.

De Kunstambassade.
An online artist-run gallery based in Rotterdam, which redistributes part of the sales proceeds equally among all participants.

Kunsten `92,
→ see *Fair Practice Code.*

Kunstenbond.
The Dutch cultural workers' union. One of the driving forces behind the implementation of fair practice policy.
→ Also see *Fair Practice Code* and *Dutch artist fee guideline*.

Level Five Co-operative.
A cooperatively run studio space organisation by and for artists in Brussels.

lumbung.
Lumbung is Indonesian for rice barn, but can also be loosely translated to commons. In ruangrupa's curatorial vision for documenta fifteen, `lumbung' was the key term and the collective of collectives that would populate the manifestation was called the `lumbung community'. The goal of cultivating the lumbung community was to build collective infrastructures for the long term. They set up many initiatives, some of

which continue today: the digital platform lumbung. space, the online lumbung radio, the publishing house lumbung press, a lumbung gallery, the gift shop lumbung kios, and lumbung land, which sought to buy land for the lumbung community.

→ Also see: *ruangrupa* and *Arts Collaboratory*.

MACAO.
: An important squat and cultural center in Milan, occupied in 2012. MACAO was run by an assembly of cultural workers called `the Art Workers'. They organised lively programs with art and music, but also were on the forefront of Web3 experiments and implemented a self-organised form of basic income.

MDPS.
: Lithuanian Art Workers Union, integrated into the solidarity-focused May 1st Labour Union (G1PS).

→ Also see *Social unions.*

Memory of the World.
: A network of interconnected shadow libraries, each maintained locally and independently from the others. It is modelled after the concept of the public library, extended to the digital realm: with books ready to be shared, meticulously cataloged, everyone is a librarian. When everyone is a librarian, a library is everywhere.

→ Also see *Multimedia Institute* and *Monoskop*.

Miethaüser Syndikat.
: A cooperative, non-commercial joint venture in Germany that helps communities acquire long-term affordable living space via a legal, collective property arrangement. As of June 2024, there are 191 *Hausprojekte* (intentional communities of a roughly housing cooperative form) within the MHS. Obligatory board membership of the syndicate ensures that bought property is removed from the market permanently.

MoneyLab.
: An international network which organises conferences

on politically left-leaning experiments with art and crypto. It emerged from the Institute of Network Cultures.

→ Also see *Institute of Network Cultures*, *Institute of Radical Imagination*, *Furtherfield*, *Black Swan*, *Economic Space Agency* and *The Sphere*.

Monoskop.
A wiki for arts and studies founded and administered by Dušan Barok since 2004. Features wiki pages with bibliographies of contemporary themes and movements in art, culture, and society such as Fediverse, technofeminism, decolonial aesthetics, the Anthropocene, community radio, free software, artists' publishing, performance, sound art, and experimental film and video.

MSCHF.
A hybrid of an art collective and product studio. Makes catchy, poppy works commenting on consumer culture and the art economy.

Multimedia Institute (MI2).
A non-profit organisation operating on the intersection of culture, art, technology, and activism, running the social and cultural center MaMa in Zagreb. Since the very beginnings, MI2 established itself around communities connected by their interest in different social and cultural fields: critically engaged digital art, film, music, and literature; digital commons: free software, free culture, and open source; philosophy and theory: interconnections on the fields of culture, advocating and grass-root organising; protection of the public domain and the struggle for spatial justice. It is a driving force behind the organisation of the independent cultural scene in Croatia and the region.

The New Centre for Research & Practice.
Offers interdisciplinary, online-only courses, mostly in critical theory, cultural analysis, philosophy and art history. One of the only serious organisations that grew from the MOOC-boom. It operates the platform *&&& Journal*.

New Design Congress.
An independent research group founded by Cade Diehm, confronting the gap between what is said to be happening and what is actually happening in digitised societies. Publishes great texts and conducts critical deep dives into the working of new technologies.

New European Bauhaus (NEB).
A policy and funding initiative from the European Commission, using art and culture to smoothen the green transition in the built environment.

New Models.
A podcast addressing the emergent effects of networked technology on life. Has a defining role in new media art discourse and the scene's reputation economy. Hosted by Caroline Busta and Lilinternet.

New World Academy.
The *New World Academy* was a school founded by BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht and artist Jonas Staal, with the aim to study the role of art in the context of stateless political struggle. It operated between 2013 and 2017.

New World Summit.
An artistic and political organisation, initiated by artist Jonas Staal, providing alternative parliaments to host organisations that are currently excluded from democracy. Instances were developed in many museums around the world, but most notably in Rojava, Kurdistan, where its political commitment and contribution far exceeded the usual scope of social art projects.

NICC.
An artist-run NGO in Belgium, creating space for interaction between visual artists, institutions and society. NICC operates with specific attention to the socio-economic position of visual artists, and does so within local, regional and international registers.

The Office for Postartistic Services.
An alliance aimed at providing art-related support to social and political movements, as well as activism in

various forms, which emerged in Poland in the early 2010s. It operates inside and beyond art institutions; with, against, and beyond art. Its emblem and spirit animal is the mythical Duckrabbit. It embraces the ambivalence of `postart'. Postartistic practices deployed by the Office have included, for instance, Strike Paintings, in which art works were carried around as protest signs during various demonstrations, and the organisation of the March for Hospitality, a march in support of migrants and refugees, characterised by the postartistic visual idiom of silver and golden heat blankets used as flags.

Open Culture!,
→ see *Culture Strike Slovakia.*

Open School East.
A free, independent art school and community space in London that focuses on collective learning through the arts. Founded in 2013.

Owneh Initiative.
A coalition of Palestinian civil organisations that seeks to break away from the colonial funding system and gain independence of Palestinian civil society organisations from outside interference. After October 2023, it organised print sales and other fundraisers to support Palestinian culture directly, but also created a `Resource Basket'. With this pot of money, they are able to (symbolically) compensate people and organisations who reject toxic philanthropic money. If one can reject toxic philanthropy, but still be able to pay next month's rent, solidary action obviously becomes a much more attractive option.

PACBI.
The Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), initiated in 2004 to contribute to the struggle for Palestinian freedom, justice, and equality. The academic and cultural strand of the international BDS movement. Always targets complicity, never identity.

Patreon.
One of the biggest crowdfunding platforms, used by

content creators to build their communities of subscribers. It is especially popular among podcasters.

The People's Free University.
A coalition of students and other squatters in Amsterdam, as part of the global movements of Student Encampments. In the summer of 2023, the People's Free University liberated several derelict buildings and turned them into learning spaces for the people.

Picasso in Palestine.
A collaboration between artist Khaled Hourani and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven. *Buste de Femme*, a painting by Pablo Picasso in the collection of the Van Abbemuseum, was exhibited at the International Art Academy Palestine in Ramallah. The process took over two years, including complex arrangements for the transport and insurance of a work to a non-recognised state and the construction of a climate-controlled white cube.

Pirate Care.
A transnational research project and a network of activists, scholars, media artists, and practitioners who stand against the criminalisation of solidarity and for a common care infrastructure. It sprung up during the Covid-pandemic, and its activities so far include two publications, a conference, and an exhibition.

Platform BK.
An active think-tank that reflects on the role of art in society and campaigns for improvements in art policy. Platform BK is an association with about 600 members, and a rotating core team of paid organisers who serve 3 to 4 years each. Platform BK was a key actor in developing the Dutch artists' fee guideline.
→ Also see *Dutch artist fee guideline, Fair Practice Code, BKNL,* and *Post-Precarity Camp*

Post-Precarity Autumn Camp: How to Survive as an Artist.
A five-day workshop series held in 2021 for recent graduates in the arts, organised by the Institute of Network

Cultures, Platform BK, and Hotel Maria Kapel. It covered topics like the gig economy, art world finances, cryptocurrency, and self-organisation, aiming to provide practical skills for artists navigating the contemporary cultural sector. The camp's insights were compiled into a *Post-Precarity Zine: Toolbox for Beginning Artists*.

→ Also see *Institute of Network Cultures* and *Platform BK*.

Post-Office.
Space in Amsterdam run by a cooperative of mostly cultural workers. A prototype for collective futures, offering space as a directly democratic shared resource. Node in the Index Space network.

→ Also see *Index Space*.

The Question of Funding.
A Palestinian collective whose work focuses on the money flows and power structures in the arts: What culture does the donor economy create? How did neoliberal models of funding impact the structures of cultural production? How can we politicise the relation between the individual and the institution? What grassroots models of funding exist in society? How do we reclaim funding as a communal practice? How to think through practices of interdependency? Is funding just about money? Is there such a thing as unconditional funding? Can we work without funding? The Question of Funding was part of the lumbung community around documenta fifteen.

→ Also see *Dayra* and *lumbung*.

RADMIN.
Short for radical administration. Britain's first festival of administration, bringing together artists and entrepreneurs for three days of talks, meals, and experiments. Organised by Kate Rich in 2019 at Cube Cinema, Bristol.

→ Also see *Feral Trade*.

RAQS Media Collective.
Collective working at the intersection of contemporary art, philosophical speculation, media, curating, and historical enquiry. Founded in New Delhi by Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi and Shuddhabrata Sengupta in

1992. In 2000, RAQS co-founded Sarai, South Asia's most prominent and productive platform for research and reflection on the transformation of urban space and contemporary realities, especially with regard to cities, data and information, law, and media infrastructures.

Reshape.
A collaborative, bottom-up research project that proposed instruments for transition towards an alternative, fairer, and unified arts ecosystem across Europe and the Southern Mediterranean, with partner organisations from fourteen countries, which ran from 2018 until 2021.
→ Also see *Fairypurse*.

RiVAL (ReImagining Value Action Lab).
A workshop for the radical imagination, social justice and decolonisation at Lakehead University, founded and directed by Max Haiven. RiVAL develops an antifascist game and publishes the podcast *What do we want?* about movement-building today. Its most impressive project was The World after Amazon, for which rank-and-file Amazon workers were invited to participate in a science fiction-writing course. Participants were paid. The workers' stories, based on the prompt to imagine a world after Amazon, were published in print, digitally, and as an audiobook.

ruangrupa.
A collective of artists and curators based in Jakarta, Indonesia, founded in 2000. ruangrupa promotes artistic ideas within urban and cultural contexts through the involvement of artists and other disciplines such as the social sciences, politics, technology, or the media so as to open up critical reflections and perspectives on contemporary urban problems in Indonesia. It has been one of the driving forces behind the rise of social practice art around the world, having curated exhibitions like the 2011 Singapore Biennial, the Gwangju Biennials of 2002 and 2018, the 2014 São Paolo Biennial, transACTION: Sonsbeek in 2016, and

documenta fifteen in 2022. Member of the Arts Collaboratory.

→ Also see *Arts Collaboratory* and *lumbung*.

RYBN.

Artist collective based in Paris since 1999, leading extra-disciplinary investigations on complex systems and phenomena within the realms of economics and cybernetics – high-frequency trading, financial algorithms, flash crashes, market infrastructures, tax avoidance, opaque schemes and offshore financial circuits, artificial intelligence, and digital labour. They published *ALGOFFSHORE* (2025), a book with manuals and graphs on the art of automated tax evasion.

Sarai,

→ see *RAQS Media Collective*.

School of Commons.

Para-institutional initiative dedicated to peer learning and the study and development of self-organised knowledge production through commons-based methods and practices. Hosted at the Zürich University of the Arts (ZHdK), but the program takes place mostly online.

The School of Mutations,

→ see *Institute of Radical Imagination*.

Screen Actors Guild.

Union of film and television actors in the United States. Famously, its president was Ronald Reagan for seven years between 1947 and 1960. Not all cultural workers' unions are cool.

Shared Visions.

A European project (2024-2028) aiming to establish an international cooperative of visual artists, headquartered in the Balkans. Led by Fond B92 in Serbia with partners in Montenegro, Ukraine, Portugal, Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands.

The Silent University.

A solidarity-based knowledge exchange platform by displaced people and forced migrants. Founded in 2012 by artist Ahmet Öğüt and often using art world infrastructures.

Slovak Culture Strike.
To fight against the repressive legislation and political appointments by the authoritarian government that took power in 2023, a group of Slovak cultural workers formed the Open Culture! platform, established a new cultural workers union, and declared the Slovak Culture Strike on the 5th of September 2024. They rally around three simple demands: good governance, fair payment, and an end to political censorship. The Culture Strike strike quickly garnered massive support among cultural workers throughout Slovakia, including those working in public institutions.

Social union.
A needs-based form of unionising, bringing people together on grounds that include, but are not limited to, work. In a social union, art workers can stand shoulder to shoulder with delivery drivers, fellow housing tenants, student debt strikers, and other groups exploited by capital in complex ways.
→ Also see *Green ban strikes* and *Debt strikes*.

The Sphere.
A DAO for circus and other live arts, which aims to create a regenerative flow of resources and creative energy with a mix of blockchain technology and love letter-writing.

State of the Arts (SOTA).
A collective of cultural workers and an open platform to reimagine the conditions that shape the art world today, working from Brussels.
→ Also see *Kunst = solidair*, Fair Practice Label, and *Shared Visions*.

Strike Outset.
A global labour boycott of Outset Contemporary Art Fund and all its projects, demanding Outset and its directors close its Israeli chapter. Reasons to start the strike were the structural and personal connections between Outset Israel and the Netanyahu regime, and the fact that several corporate

donors are involved in human rights violations.

Substack.
: Platform on which individual writers can host their email newsletters. It allows users to collect donations and contributions from subscribers, which makes it much easier to monetise digital textual content. The popularity of Substack has led to a boom of self-publishing among textual content creators in recent years.

SUMMIT Non-Aligned Initiatives in Education Culture.
: A conference in Berlin in May 2007, bringing together many of the key figures behind the educational turn in curating.

Teatro Valle Occupato.
: Founded by a group of actors, musicians, directors, technicians, and creatives in 2011. The public Teatro Valle in Rome, which had been shut down and privatised because of post-financial crisis budget cuts in 2010, was squatted and turned into a `theatre commons'. `Communards', including paying members and volunteers, ran the programme and made collective decisions about management and finances. Evicted in 2014, but living on as an emblem of cultural commons.

Tertulia.
: Cooperative online bookshop. Offers its members books at discounted prices because of bulk buy benefits.

Treaty of Finsbury Park.
: An immersive fiction that looks at what it would be like if other species were to rise up and demand equal rights with humans, organised by Furtherfield in London. For 5 years human park-lovers have taken part in this fiction by playing for and as another species.
→ Also see *Furtherfield.*

Ubuweb.
: A pirate shadow library consisting of hundreds of thousands of freely downloadable avant-garde artifacts, notably including many video art works. Established in 1996 and shuttered in 2025.

ULUS.
The Serbian association of fine artists. Beyond running several gallery spaces and offering services and products to its members, ULUS is the main driver of the advocacy for artist fees in Serbia.

Unconditional Basic Income (or Universal Basic Income).
A periodic cash payment unconditionally delivered to all on an individual basis, without means-test or work requirement.
→ Also see *Basic Income Earth Network*, *Art for UBI campaign, Basic Income for the Arts,* and *Creatives Rebuild New York.*

UNESCO.
The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation. A specialised agency of the United Nations with the aim of promoting world peace and security through international cooperation in education, arts, sciences, and culture. Published a report in 2019 which concluded that the largest subsidy for the arts comes not from governments, patrons or the private sector, but from artists themselves in the form of unpaid or underpaid labour.

Vermeir & Heiremans.
Artist duo living and working in Belgium. Vermeir & Heiremans started their collaborative artistic practice, when they defined their apartment in Brussels as an artwork and created the Art House Index in 2006. In the following decades, they developed a deep artistic research practice focusing on the interplay between art, speculation, finance, and real estate. They are co-founders of Jubilee.
→ Also see *A Modest Proposal* and *Jubilee*.

Visual Artists Scheme / Beeldende Kunstenaars Regeling (BKR).
A post-WWII social scheme providing visual artists in the Netherlands with welfare support under special conditions. Artists could continue working and selling art while receiving government support. In return, they would periodically donate a piece of art

to the collection of the municipality they inhabited. The BKR was established in 1957 after advocacy from the Professional Association of Visual Artists (BBK), Socialist Artists' Circle, Union of Artists for the Defence of Culture, and the Committee for Artists and Intellectuals, and it was defended during an artist occupation of the Rijksmuseum in 1969. It was defunded as part of neoliberal reforms in 1987.

Voordekunst.
In 2010, Voordekunst, the first non-profit cultural crowdfunding platform globally, was founded in the Netherlands. Voordekunst allows artists and creatives to ask small donors to help make a project come true. In practice, many of the donations are made by family and friends.

Wages For Wages Against.
A Swiss campaign for the fair remuneration of artists, better working conditions, and an alternative economy in the arts. It was initiated by Ramaya Tegegne in March 2017 and remained active until 2024.

Who Can Afford to be Critical?
Graduation project from the Design Academy Eindhoven by Afonso de Matos, consisting of posters, campaign materials, texts, and an installation, which were later turned into a book. With a sharp sense of humour, De Matos discusses the limits that affordability, class, and labour impose upon the educational promise of holding a 'critical' design practice.

WHW (What, How & for Whom).
Curatorial collective from Zagreb. As curators of Galerija Nova (Zagreb), Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna), the 11th Istanbul Biennale, and many more exhibitions around the world, WHW have shaped the ways in which social practice art is exhibited and talked about today. They also publish books and host the alternative art education program WHW Academy.

Working Artists in the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.).
Founded in New York City in 2008 by a group of visual and performing artists and independent curators. W.A.G.E. is one of the most prominent and effective advocacy organisations for better working conditions in the arts. They launched a W.A.G.E. calculator for fair artist fees in 2014, a W.A.G.E. Certification, an award to publicly recognise nonprofits demonstrating a history of, and commitment to, voluntarily paying artist fees that meet W.A.G.E. standards, as well as a WAGENCY to negotiate on behalf of members.

The World after Amazon,
→ Also see see *RiVAL.*

Za K.R.U.H.
`A collective of cultural workers in Croatia, which campaigns for better working conditions and organises actions like a strike in support of Gaza.

ZASUK.
The Slovenian cultural workers' labour union, founded in 2021.

ORIGIN STORIES AND WORDS OF GRATITUDE

This book grew slowly from five years of activism, organising, assembling, and studying. It brings together chapters that encompass different styles, structures, and atmospheres, reflecting these differing origins. Some are reworkings of lectures held in art spaces or at conferences, others are based on columns, articles, blogposts, or open letters. Three chapters were co-authored with Koen Bartijn, Mia van den Bos, and Roel Griffioen, who contributed their writing styles as well as their arguments. This variety of material warrants a brief origin story for each chapter, which I will also use to express my gratitude to everyone involved in the making of this book.

The first version of Art in Permacrisis was in the form of a lecture given at the media art conference *MetaForumX – PermaCrises* in October 2024, co-organised by Flóra Barkóczi, Geert Lovink, Áron Lödi, Diana McCarty, Zsolt Miklósvölgyi, and János Sugár at Trafó House in Budapest. I was there with Geert on behalf of the Institute of Network Cultures (INC), where I've worked since 2019. At the time, I was already co-hosting a podcast called *Art in Permacrisis* with Candela Cubria as part of the INC research project *Creative Reset*. We invited speakers with combined backgrounds in art, theory, and organising to share their insights, so as to stake out a series of visions on the role of art in society while the world is on fire. For MetaForum, I did my best to condense the main takeaways from these conversations into a metareflection. So, the podcast became a lecture. And later yet, it became a chapter, based on a lecture, based on a podcast. This series of metamorphoses was made possible by the support of people who were, in general, indispensable forces behind this book: Geert, who has tirelessly mentored me and given me time, feedback, and encouragement; the great team at the Institute of Network Cultures, including Tommaso Campagna, Jordi Viader Guerrero, Carolina Pinto, Giulia Timis, Salome Berdzenishvili, Anielek Niemyjski, Ruben Stoffelen, Candela, and Chloë Arkenbout, which made

the publishing of *Art in Permacrisis* possible; and the podcast guests, who have inspired my thinking about the organisation of art workers in the face of the ever-growing stack of crises. These guests are, in order of appearance, Kuba Szreder, Emanuele Braga, Katja Praznik, Yazan Khalili, Constant Dullaart (sort of), Inte Gloerich, Kate Rich, Vermeir & Heiremans, Gizem Üstüner, and Justin O'Connor.[1]

Many people have contributed, knowingly or unknowingly, to Payment for Art Work. From 2020 to 2023, I worked for the Dutch art workers' organisation Platform BK, running from one policy discussion to another, writing open letters to call out museums for underpaying artists, and organising against exploitative studio landlords with art workers'. In this day-to-day hustle, it was hard to maintain space for fundamental strategic questions. There was always something more urgent to oversee. And as a participant in the policy machine, it was hard not to internalise the norms of managerial pragmatism. Things just needed to get done. Therefore, it was only after the next generation of art workers took over the lead of Platform BK that I had time to start reflecting on questions beyond immediacy and urgency. Yet this organising experience – which in some ways continues – has been absolutely crucial. I am deeply grateful to the Platform BK family, including Rune Peitersen, Joram Kraaijeveld, Yuri Veerman, Alina Lupu, Esmee Schoutens, Renée Steenbergen, Jack Segbars, Mia van den Bos, Harriet Morley, Jeannette Slütter, Hilda Moucharrafieh, Arthur Kneepkens, and especially Koen Bartijn. May we struggle side by side for many more years!

Furthermore, I am thankful for working on the Dutch Artist Fee Guideline and the Fair Practice Code with colleagues in BKNL, especially Peter van den Bunder; to Rune for hosting me on a writing retreat in Brussels; to Katrien Reist, Nicolas Galeazzi, and the other friends at SOTA for introducing me to the roots of `fair practice'; to Katja Praznik for hosting an amazing special stream on artistic

labour during the *International Labour Process Conference 2025*, where Koen and I had the pleasure of presenting a paper on Fair Practice policy in the Netherlands; and to Vahida Ramujkić, Sebastian Olma, Fabiola Fiocco, and Char Beelaerts for their invaluable inputs, reflections, and feedback.

Transvaluation Tactics is co-authored with Koen Bartijn. We based the text on a lecture we gave in a hybrid setting, making a live connection between the *Cuts & Currencies* program by De Appel and Amsterdam Alternative in Amsterdam and the St.Joost Academy's Studium Generale 2025 in Breda. Between the two live audiences, we told stories of artists making money, literally, here and now. It proved to be an amazingly synergetic set-up, in no small part because of the enthusiastic support of Lara Khaldi and Sophie Soobramanien at De Appel, as well as the St.Joost production team. Many thanks to them. In terms of content, we built on the long legacy of money and art experiments in the INC research network MoneyLab (especially the work of Inte Gloerich and Geert Lovink), as well as conversations with Erik Bordeleau (The Sphere), Alessandro Y. Longo (CurveLabs, Circles), Kathrin Böhm (Company Drinks), and Kate Rich (Feral Trade). We are grateful to be dwarves on the shoulders of these giants.

1 The Art in Permacrisis podcast is ongoing, so hit that subscribe button on SoundCloud or Apple Podcasts, or tune in to Radio Alhara every first Thursday of the month at 10 a.m. (Bethlehem time)!

Writing We Want Everything would not have been possible without the inspiring Art for UBI campaign by the Institute of Radical Imagination. Nor without all my drunk friends endlessly going on about basic income. I thank them all. A previous, extremely short version of this text was published in *Arts of the Working Class*. Editor Dalia Maini suggested borrowing the title of Nanni Balestrini's great 1971 novel, which I liked so much that I kept it for this version. This column was part of a year-long series that Dalia invited me

to write based on the chapters of this book. I had happily accepted, thinking that it would be easy to make short versions of texts I had already written anyway. It wasn't. Trying to convey a real idea in under 500 words every other month was one of the hardest things I've done as a writer. The only relief came from Dalia's consistently excellent and sharp editing, based on shared political commitment, for which I remain thankful.

Creative Class Consciousness is a theoretical chapter that I tried not to write, but ultimately couldn't resist. It explores the question of the `art worker': how to be a class-conscious cultural producer today? I was fortunate to build on the long legacy of precarity research and creative industry critique at the INC, going back to *MyCreativity* and *MoneyLab*, with important work by people like Silvio Lorusso and Seb Olma paving the way. Platform capitalism's dependence on creative labour and the increasingly efficient exploitation of artists in the digital economy remain central themes in our work, so we've continued this legacy as part of the aforementioned *Creative Reset* project. Moreover, in the summer of 2026, the INC will close its doors as Geert Lovink retires, but *Creative Reset* will continue, as it was generously welcomed (as was I) by Seb at Caradt (St.Joost Academy of Art & Design), when he invited me to come and work there in March 2024. I'm pretty lucky with these bosses, who are also friends (I still demand my workers' rights!), and who give me the freedom to work with full commitment on a shared project.

Art as Essential Work is something special. Mia van den Bos is not really a co-author of this text. She is the *original* author. She wrote the first version as an exceptionally good thesis for the Dutch Art Institute. She then joined Platform BK as a board member, and we co-organised an event on the union representation of art workers, hosted by Museum Arnhem. For this occasion, Mia turned the thesis into a

lecture. It was later also published as an INC Longform, which I had the pleasure of editing. It is therefore no wonder that, when I started writing my own thoughts on artists' unions for this book, I found myself largely recycling Mia's arguments in favour of social unionism. I reached out to see how we could deal with this – perhaps a guest chapter or interview? I was thrilled when Mia showed the most interest in reworking her text together. Through a fruitful back and forth, we added stories, examples, and theoretical reflections. We shared citations of Marx, discussed speculative value-creation, and debated the productivity of artistic labour in the comments. I am very grateful to Mia for this collaboration, and I hope many more will follow.

Are Art Institutions Political Organisations? went through many iterations. It started out as a deep dive into documenta fifteen and the lumbung community's ambition to build infrastructures for the long term. One reflection led to another, and before I knew it, I was writing about the `human zoo' of Occupy at the 7th Berlin Biennale, an exhibition that never took place, climate activists throwing soup at paintings, and more. But as the text bloated, it became clear that I was essentially grappling with questions of institutional nihilism (why does everyone seem to want to burn down the museums?), and that I could much more productively discuss these using the cases I knew more intimately: the artworks *Bakunin's Barricade* and *Picasso in Palestine*. So, I took the text apart and started over. Its final form reminds me of a philosophical thought experiment with a woollen sock: *Imagine a green woollen sock. Every time there is a hole in the green sock, it is patched with red wool. After years of patching, the entire sock is red. Is it still the same sock?*[2] Mayhaps. I don't know. But I do know that I'm quite happy with my red sock. It feels like all the patching was worthwhile. Adventurous journey, satisfying destination. My many thanks go out to the Not

Surprised Collective for keeping me politicised; Mia Lerm-Hayes for introducing me to New Institutionalism and *Picasso in Palestine*; Diletta Caimmi for inviting me to the conference *Reframing the Present: Contemporary Art, Cultural Heritage, and Social Justice* at the beautiful Palazzo Borromeo, where the structure of this final version of the text first got shape; Errol Boon for his musings on determinate negation over kriek beers in Brussels; Sebastian Olma, Sven Lütticken, Nora Sternfeld, Kuba Szreder, Comrade Duckrabbit, and Ruben Stoffelen for great conversations and feedback; and especially to Matisse Huiskens for several rounds of sharp, well-informed editing.

The making of The People's Free Academy started with the *Post-Precarity Autumn Camp*, organised in the fall of 2021 by the Institute of Network Cultures, Platform BK, and the art space Hotel Maria Kapel in Hoorn. In the midst of the Covid void, we invited twenty recently graduated artists, designers, and theatre makers to five days of conversations, workshops, and communal activities. Each day, we addressed one important theme related to working and living in the Dutch cultural sector: from working in the gig economy and mapping money flows, to experiments with crypto, staying happy and healthy, and durable self-organisation. It led to the publication of a *Post-Precarity Zine: Toolbox for Beginning Artists*, sharing lessons with a broader public, and an open letter to all art academies demanding that they take better care of the professional and economic futures of their graduates. The chapter in this book builds on that open letter, interweaving it with my own experiences at art school, student protests at the St.Joost Academy where I currently work, and the inspiring actions of the student-squatters of The People's Free Academy in 2024. I'm grateful to Koen Bartijn, Mathilde Hjelle, Dunja Nešović, Tirza Kater, and Annelien de Bruin for co-organising the *Post-Precarity Camp*; to the participants of the camp; to all the signatories of the open letter; to *Mister Motley* and

Het Parool for re-publishing it; to Karin Boelhouwer of the Kunstenbond for initiating a collaborative follow-up of the letter; to Tommaso Campagna and Morgane Billuart for producing the *Post-Precarity Zine*; to the students and teachers at St.Joost who took action against the neoliberal attack on art education; to Rosa te Velde, Falke Pisano, Patricia de Vries, and Annette Kraus for valuable conversations about art education; to Jue Yang, Florian Cramer, and Silvio Lorusso for their brilliant thinking, writing, and comments; to Seb Olma for his feedback; and to the comrades of The People's Free University for inspiring strength and perseverance in the face of repression.

2 This thought experiment is known as `Locke's Socks', John Locke's 17th-century version of the much older `Theseus's Paradox'.

Philanthropy Strike was another slow grower. Generally, arts philanthropy is a tough nut to crack. It's a complex, boring matter, involving a lot of ultra-sensitive big egos who would like to be either praised or left alone. Still, I've always found a lot of fulfillment in critiquing the increasing power of the wealthy few over the public display of art and culture. Maybe because it feels like an important uphill battle. But definitely also because of the motivated and intelligent people I had the pleasure of working with, especially artist Timo Demollin. Timo wrote a groundbreaking article for Platform BK in 2021 about a new philanthropist class in the Netherlands. It generated so much response that we decided to co-organise the symposium *De staat van het mecenaat* at Framer Framed in 2022. Eventually, this led to the publication of the Dutch-language booklet *De bevrijding van het mecenaat* by the Institute of Network Cultures and Platform BK. The English translation of the conclusion served as the basis for the chapter in this book. The productive notion of the `philanthropy strike', which added another layer to the original text, was introduced to me by the unrivalled Emanuele Braga, and activated by the

comrades of the Art Not Genocide Alliance. I am thankful and hope my reflections will contribute to the struggle.

The final chapter, How to Tap the Pipeline?, is a co-production with Roel Griffioen. It is based on an applied research funding application we wrote together. In the coming years, we hope to explore the possibilities and pitfalls of the `co-operative turn' in culture. We have a beautiful network of partners, including ArtEZ Academy, St.Joost Academy, De Appel, Clublokaal, Amsterdam Alternative, Coöpkantine, ArtEZ Press, Vormforensen, Jubilee, MaakPlaats!, Post-Office, Timo Demollin, and Valentina Vella. In the writing, we were inspired by the Post-Office community, especially Bryan Wolff, the co-operative mindset of HumDrumPress, the work of Afrikaanderwijk Coöperatie, the Platform Co-operativism Consortium, Diletta Caimmi's research on La Friche, and the Jubilee summer school *From Commons to Coop,* organised by Kathleen Vermeir, Ronny Heiremans, and Jesse van Winden. We also built on the lessons I learned while participating in Shared Visions, a European project aiming to establish an international co-operative for visual artists based in the Balkans. I thank Tijana Cvetković, Milan Djordjević, Noa Treister, and Maja Čečen of Fond B92 in Serbia for leading Shared Visions, and SOTA's Nicolas Galeazzi, SULUV's Dunja Stajonević, LandCho's Emanuele Braga and Federico Aldovisi, ISU's Rade Stijović, Soshenko 33's Anna Sorokovaya, and KickVoidLöop's Joana Macedo and Mario Roda for sifting through the myths and musts of artistic cooperativism together.

At this point, you can start to see this book for the monster it truly is. And you might grasp the level of gratitude I feel toward a publisher that dared to take on such a project. I approached Amy Gowen and Wibke Bramesfeld of HumDrumPress two years ago, when the book was not yet halfway finished. Wibke and Amy reacted with enthusiasm, which, surprisingly, endured despite failed funding applications, doubts about

structure and content, and the distractions of the many other obligations inherent to our projectarian lifestyles. Wibke's open and playful approach to graphic design, as well as Amy's commitment to high-level content and diligent editing and proofreading, made the production process of this book a joy. This process, by the way, is important. Because publishing the humdrum way is open, collective, and process-based. It is a practice of publishing that prioritises community over metrics. In other words, it is exactly the right kind of publishing for a book like this. Thank you, Amy and Wibke! I love having become part of the HumDrum circle, and hope for lasting collaborations. Onto a regenerative practice of co-operative cultural publishing!

I cannot end this expression of gratitude without acknowledging the origin of origins. I am grateful to my parents, Lysbet and Frits, for encouraging, or at least tolerating, my poor life decisions for more than 30 years. I feel lucky with the enthusiasm and interest of my dear friends. And most of all, I thank Laura Mrkša for believing in me and supporting me with love. Yes, riding the poverty jetset is a struggle, but it is also fun. I carry beautiful memories from Belgrade, Milan, Brussels, Kassel, Zagreb, Marseille, and, of course, our home in Amsterdam. As long as I'm stuck in the poverty jetset, I hope it is by your side.

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Goodbye Poverty Jetset:
How Art Workers Make Solidarity Economies

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The art economy makes some people filthy rich but leaves most people making art in poverty. How is that possible? And, more importantly, how can it be changed? Can we imagine and organise an art world that is economically sustainable for the people working in it?

Each chapter in *Goodbye Poverty Jetset* focuses on one alternative model that artworkers already practice, including commons, co-operatives, community currencies, basic income, infrastructural critique, fair payment guidelines, economically responsible art education, and social unions. A combination of case studies, theory, and historical reflections provide solid strategic insights into what works for the workers and what doesn't.

This book is a toolbox for artists, designers, museum guards, curators, writers, tour guides, and art handlers – in short, for all the artworkers who want to change the system they live and work in, collectively.

With contributions by Koen Bartijn, Mia van den Bos, and Roel Griffioen.

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